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CRUEL FORTUNE



VOL. I

CRUEL FORTUNE

BY

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"QUEENS OF SONG," "NOTABLE WOMEN," "MISS MILLY MOSS"

ETC

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I



LONDON

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SADIE

AS A TOKEN OF LOVE

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CRUEL FORTUNE

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

A SELECT circle of admirers had collected in the summer twilight to listen to the harp and cornet players who had stopped before the "Crown," opposite Aldridge's, in St. Martin's Lane. There was a choice assemblage of little boys and little girls; one long scraggy maid of fourteen, carrying an infinitesimal baby; a very short boy staggering under the weight of a fat infant; a brewer's drayman, lounging against the wall; a butcher boy, a loitering policeman, a printer's devil, one or two tattered women, with two or three nondescripts—who had gathered to hearken to the then popular strains of "The Ivy Green" and "Woodman, Spare that Tree."

The harpist was the more remarkable man of the two performers. He was tall, about

five-and-thirty years of age, with a noble, well-marked face, though all fire seemed quenched by the iron pressure of poverty, drudgery, and constant hardship. His hands were delicate in form, yet much injured by exposure to all kinds of weather. His dress was shabby in the extreme. An old brown coat hung loosely round his spare figure, while a battered hat shaded his careworn features; his boots were large, ill-shaped, and unpolished, and there was a forlorn seediness about his entire appearance which betrayed the utmost poverty. Yet there was a certain grace pervading every gesture and action, which betokened the influence of now bygone "better days."

The cornet-player was a man of a totally different aspect, in every respect the opposite to his comrade. He was short and thick-set, he had a jaunty, half-tipsy air, and a vulgar, defiant manner. He had an indescribably unpleasant way of swaggering, laughing coarsely, bandying low jokes with the crowd, and in his slightest movements jarred on the nerves. In point of dress he had the advantage of his friend; though a slovenly dirtiness was, to a great extent, the distinguishing feature of his toilette.

At the conclusion of the third air—"The Light of Other Days"—the cornet-player shook the mouthpiece of his instrument vehemently; then drawing from his pocket a disreputable blue bird's-eye handkerchief, therewith wiped the beads of moisture from his forehead, and mopped his throat and neck.

"By Jove!" said he, with a grimace and a long-drawn grunt, "by jingo, but this day *has* been a stinger. O, Lord, but I'm hot! 'Pon my soul, I'm as thirsty as if I'd swallowed a lime-kiln; I'm blowed if I aren't as dry as the Epsom Road of a Derby Day, or the pick and choice of old Thingembob's jokes. I can't stand this any longer, Raymond. By George, I'm hanged if I can or do either, by jingo!"

With these words, he darted into the "Crown," and disappeared. The harpist remained outside, twanging the strings or playing chords. That portion of the crowd which consisted of persons who had anything to do, went on, while the little boys and the idle girls, and one or two lazy women, stayed for the second part of the programme.

As the harpist was going through his solo performance, a carriage came dashing at a

headlong pace down the street. The horses had become unmanageable from sudden fright, and the coachman was in vain essaying to rein them in or make them obey his hand, for he had entirely lost his control. As the vehicle came flying along, a shrill scream rang out. It was uttered by a woman, who waved her arms with an aspect of the wildest terror. Raymond, as his companion had called him, looked up, and following the glance of her distended eyes, beheld a chubby urchin of three or four years running distractingly in the middle of the street. The coachman was unaware of the proximity of the child, and even had he known of the danger, he would have been unable to check the horses.

The harpist, without a moment's hesitation, sprang forward. It was a perilous attempt, for the animals were rearing and plunging fearfully. The occupant of the carriage stretched his head from the window, but he was incapable of rescuing either himself or others. Raymond darted on the child, and seized it with a firm grasp; but just as he was recovering his balance, one of the horses plunged forward. Quick as lightning, Raymond caught

the rein, and pushed the creature back; then, with a bound, he gained the pavement, and placed the child in the arms of its mother. The whole scene passed in an instant, yet every one felt as if it had taken an hour.

The poor mother clasped her boy to her breast with an incoherent outburst of grateful thanks to the brave man who had rescued him; then, with a few indistinct muttered words of blessing, she disappeared.

The horses, probably thinking it would not be worth while to continue playing pranks when there was no longer any chance of injuring anybody, suddenly calmed. As they quieted, Raymond grew pale as death, reeled, and fell into the arms of a policeman, who had been watching the scene. A crowd gathered magically; reinforcements running up from Long Acre, Little St. Andrew Street, Cranbourn Street, and the various abutting regions. In a moment, all was confusion.

The cornet-player emerged from the public-house as his companion fell.

"Hilloa, hilloa! what's the row, my covey?" he exclaimed, pushing towards his friend and elbowing the bystanders aside.

The gentleman who was in the carriage,

seeing the man fall, opened the door and sprang out. He was a tall, handsome man of about sixty—the beau-ideal of an English nobleman—with the lofty, gracious bearing of one of gentle birth and breeding.

“Is he much hurt?” he asked, making his way through the knot of idlers and curious gazers, every one yielding instinctively to his commanding step.

“I don’t know, sir, I’m sure,” answered the policeman, on whose knee the head of the insensible man lay. “He looks like it, though, uncommon, I must say.”

“He must be taken to the hospital, for he looks as if he were dying,” said the gentleman. “A cab! There is none in sight, and ten minutes’ delay may be worth as much as the man’s life. What is to be done?”

“Well, sure enough, he does seem badly hurt,” observed the policeman. “He must be taken to St. George’s. Don’t you be uneasy, sir; bless you, these things happen every day a’most—so much the worse, to be sure. He doesn’t seem inclined to hopen his heyes—that’s what I look to, you see. Stand off, some of you. Do you want to smother the man?”

“Brandy—that’s the thing,” interposed the cornet-player, with the air of a man who knows what he is talking about. “Why, there ain’t nothing like brandy, by jingo!”

The gentleman hastily gave him a shilling, and he darted once more into the “Crown,” re-appearing in a second with a glass of brandy, and followed by the landlord and several persons.

The cornet-player knelt down, and opening his comrade’s mouth, poured some drops of the liquid between his lips. In a few moments the eyelids of the harpist unclosed. He stared vacantly around him; then, raising himself on his elbow, he seemed to be endeavouring to recollect what had happened.

“Well, how are you, old chap? How do you feel, eh?” demanded the cornet-player, affectionately.

“Yes—I remember, Farley—I wrenched my arm. Let me get up,” muttered Raymond. The policeman assisted him to rise.

The gentleman anxiously inquired how he felt. Raymond assured him that he did not experience any ill effects from the accident.

“I think I got a turn at the danger to the child,” added he. “I feel all right now.”

"I am afraid you have been hurt," said the gentleman, watching his unsteady movements. "I ought to make you some recompense for your bravery, especially as I was, however innocently, the cause of the mishap, and as I in all probability owe my safety to you."

He drew out his pocket-book and opened it, but glancing at Raymond, he saw an expression on the face of the poor street musician that made him hastily open the compartment which, instead of gold or notes, contained merely his cards of address.

"If you find that your arm has been injured even temporarily,—if you are disabled from work, you will apply to me, and I will not fail to help you. I am going to Scotland now, but I shall hear of your application, if you require my assistance," he said, giving him a card.

Raymond took it, and bowed his head in token of gratitude. He glanced at the inscription on the card, which was "The Earl of Charrington, —Carlton-house Terrace." Then Lord Charrington stepped into his carriage and was whirled away.

The crowd, however, was not so eager to depart. The little group of idlers felt more

indignant than otherwise when they observed the two musicians prepare to move on, and fancied they were being defrauded of the best portion of the evening's entertainment.

"Oh, I'm all right," said the harpist, somewhat impatiently, in answer to the irritating inquiries which besieged him. "Come, Farley, let's be moving."

He nodded to the policeman, and to those of the loiterers who had helped him; then took up his harp, and walked away, accompanied by the cornet-player.

"My arm certainly feels stiff," he remarked, as they walked up Bloomsbury-street, "but it doesn't pain much, luckily."

"You may well say luckily," answered Farley. "I say, I hope it will be all right in a day or two. 'Twould be a deuce of a job, you know, if you were knocked up and couldn't play—uncommon hockerd—both for you and for me—but especially for you, you know."

Raymond shuddered, and hurriedly changed the subject. They went on their accustomed round without recurring to his accident, and it was, as usual, late at night when the pair turned their steps towards their respective domiciles—one to the Blackfriars-road, the other to Drury-lane.

CHAPTER II.

FARLEY SUSTAINS A MISFORTUNE.

FARLEY, the cornet-player, was walking along Holborn, alone, and with a somewhat disconsolate air, his hands in his pockets, and without his favourite instrument.

He was stepping briskly across a turning, when a man abruptly ran against him.

“Hallo! where the dickens are you driving? Oh! it’s you, is it?” he exclaimed, having prepared to heartily abuse the incautious pedestrian, but being disarmed on recognising an old friend. “Why the deuce couldn’t you send word you was coming, and not go and pitch me into the middle of next week in this style? What are you up to this fine morning, eh? No good, I’ll be bound. What’s your little game? Give us your fist, old boy! I’m uncommon glad to see you, though you

did nearly knock the wind out of me, by jingo!"

"What are you after?" demanded the other, accepting the proffered hand, with a friendly air. "Where are you off to now? I thought you were gener'ly attending business about this time?"

"Bother it, yes," responded Farley, in a vexed tone. "Why, the fact of the matter is—but, blow it, 'tis a long story, and it's dry work talking. Have a drain?"

"Well, I don't mind if I do," answered his friend. He was a tall, seedy-looking individual, with bushy red whiskers, and a lurking, suspicious glance, as if he feared in each lamp-post an officer of some kind or another. At the same time, he evidently desired to assume what he considered to be a military air and manner, for he swaggered defiantly, cocked his hat over his eye, and switched about him with a little cane, as if to delude the passers-by into the idea that he forgot for the moment that it was not a sword.

Farley pushed open the door of the "Goat and Compasses" and went in, followed by his friend.

"Well, what's it to be, old boy?" he asked, carelessly.

"Well, I don't think we can do better than a drain of Old Tom," was the answer.

"Carry, my hangel! a quatern of Old Tom and two glasses," said Farley, in a jaunty yet insinuating tone to the barmaid, as he threw the necessary funds on the shining lead surface of the bar.

The Hebe of the "Goat and Compasses" was a very smart young party, with exceedingly black eyes and wonderfully red lips. At the moment when Farley and his friend entered, she was engaged in a most interesting flirtation with two dissipated-looking, elaborately dressed young fellows—probably law-students from Gray's Inn—who were lounging over a mid-day libation of bitter ale. She was evidently greatly chagrined on being thus cavalierly addressed by the vulgar man in the shabby suit, but she did not betray her vexation, merely placing the required glasses before him, and resuming her animated conversation as if nothing had occurred to interrupt it.

"A friend of yours, Carry?" inquired the younger "swell," confidentially, as he knocked the ash off his cigar.

"The idea!" Carry tossed her head, and with a disdainful glance turned her back on

the two objectionable customers at the lower end of the bar. "Don't be ridiculous," she said, with a little short dry laugh, as if the joke had been a very pungent one.

"Well, you were going to tell me?" said Farley's friend, settling himself comfortably in a corner, on an empty barrel.

"To be sure—of course. You want to know why I'm strolling about for my own private diversion on this particular occasion, instead of going to my office like any other gent, and reading over my morning's correspondence? Reckonin' I'm 'avin' an 'olliday, eh? But you're clean out, and no mistake—never was further from the real truth of the case in your life before, though you're a smart chap, generally speakin'. The fact is, Braxford, the firm of Farley, Raymond, and Co.—there isn't any Co., you understand, but that makes no difference, and it sounds better—the firm has dissolved for the present, and my partner has been obliged to retire for a time into the seclusion of private life."

"Into private life!" echoed Braxford, in a significant tone, and with a peculiar flash of the eye. "Then you mean he has to——"

"Lord bless you, is it Raymond? Is it

that proud chap? He that is such a stuck-up fellow, and goes on as if he was the heir to a title and ten thousand a year, only kep out by the right owner—he never puts himself in the way of being County-Courted, not he—always does everything on the square—is as ignerrant as a three-year-old of the meaning of a judgment summons. But, mind you, I don't say so to disparage him—not I, by George! I like him. He's a jolly good fellow, with no humbug about him—gold all through, as sure as my name's Tom Farley. He certainly isn't one to stand a drain, or that sort of thing; and he very often turns up his nose at a joke, if it touches on anything he don't choose to have laughed at, and looks as solemn as a judge if one hints at going on the booze once in a way, or so on; but what the dickens, a man can't be everything, barrin' he was a chammylion; and then he's married, poor devil, you know—and of course a fellow must keep himself quiet when he's got a family, and give up all his larks—of course, it's to be expected. However, where was I? Oh, yes—to be brief, as the swell in the play says—Raymond, poor fellow, has met with a accident, which lays him up."

"How was that?" inquired Braxford, observing that he paused.

"Well, the long and the short of it is, that, some six weeks ago—let's see, this is——"

"August—the fourth."

"Ah, yes, to be sure—just six weeks ago, we was playin' in St. Martin's-lane, just outside the 'Crown'—you know that public, they keep stunning good brandy there—but that's by the way. However, we was playin' there, when a coach comes dashing along, like I don't know what, and nearly demolishes a child. Raymond, who is gener'ly so quiet, you know—I should never have dreamt of his tearin' about him in such a style—what must Raymond do, by jingo, but make a rush at the two infuriated quadrupeds, and stop them."

"Rather a dangerous experiment," observed Braxford, sipping from his glass.

"Rather. I was in the public at the moment, looking after my own affairs, as an honest-minded Christian might, and which is nothing to nobody. When I came out, what should I see but Raymond lying as flat as a flounder, as dead as a fluke, and as white—ay—ay, as white as anything, in the arms of a crusher. You may just imagine my feelins

at that critical moment. His face was as white—as anything you like, and it was only after nearly soaking him in brandy that we could get him to so much as open his eyes. I really thought it was all over with him. I think I may fairly say that I brought him through.”

“Then,” remarked his friend, “he had been run over, I suppose?”

“No, no,” answered Farley, “he strained his arm some way, I don’t know how; he didn’t feel it much at first, for a week or so, but after a while his arm grew so stiff he couldn’t carry his harp, or even pull the strings with his left hand. I don’t know whether I mentioned it was his left arm that he hurt? Poor devil, it’s a terrible affair for him, for he has a lot of young ’uns, which is a lamentable thing under the present circumstances, or, for the matter of that,” he added, with a philosophical air, “under any circumstances! And then to be reglarly knocked up like this. Hang it, it’s hard lines for a fellow, I’m blowed if it isn’t.”

“Then how does he manage to carry on?” asked Braxford.

“O, goodness only knows! He writes most

beautifully, and that has stood his friend to a certain extent in this unfortunate concatenation of affairs, for Thingemy and What's-a-name, in Regent-street, who used to give him odd jobs now and again, have helped him a little. They gave him some music to copy for military bands and such like, and they sent him for a little while to the British Museum to write out old chants and things from the manuscripts there, for Lord Somebody, who's making a collection of some old rubbish or other. I believe they knew him when he was a swell—for I really do believe myself he was a swell at some time or other. But, by Jove, when one has a family to support, odd jobs are very little use, and it's no joke to make a Saturday. What's a few shillins when one has a parcel of babbies squalling for grub, and not so much as a loaf of bread in the cupboard? 'Pon my life, now, it does make a man feel like I don't know what."

"Truly," reflectively observed Braxford, who had finished his glass, "I'm sorry for him. I didn't know much of him, to be sure; but, from what I have seen, he seems a well-enough sort of fellow. I suppose he has come down on you, though, for a trifle to help him over this little difficulty?"

Farley hastily swallowed the last contents of his glass, and then coughed violently, to smother an embarrassment which he could not hide.

“What the deuce!” he then said; “how is a fellow to lend what he hasn’t got, I should like to know? To take nothing from nothing is a problem that even the wise men out of the East couldn’t be expected to solve, letting alone that other cove that used to do the riddles and questions one finds in the ‘rithmetic books.”

“That’s true enough,” responded Braxford, in a philosophical tone.

“It isn’t so jolly easy to find the needful for one’s self,” added Farley, “particularlly when one has an old woman of one’s own to keep; and as for giving another chap a leg, when he’s got a lot of children, and a wife into the bargain—well, I’m uncommon sorry for him, and all that; but it’s morally impossible. What can I do? I have been to see him only once, too, I’m ashamed to say; but what’s a fellow to do? Now, I put it to you, as a reasonable man, who knows something of the ways of the world, where is the good of going to see a poor devil, and being made to feel miserable, when you can’t do nothing for him, and particularlly when one hasn’t much time, being, as I might

say, a business man, with affairs to attend to? You know it isn't easy to manage all this, by Jupiter! Now, is it?"

He spoke as if vehemently defending himself from some unjust charge or accusation.

"But," inquired Braxford, who was preparing to depart, and had commenced elaborately polishing his elbow on the lead-covered bar, "what will he do if he doesn't get over this little—this little difficulty?"

"O, it isn't so serious as to keep him from business for more than a few weeks at most. The only thing is that, perhaps, he and all his young 'uns may be starved to death before he can go out again; for people can't very well do without eating for seven or eight weeks, you know. I really must go in a day or two to see how he is getting on. I pity him from my soul, I'm sure; but pity's rather thin fare to hungry folks, by George!"

"Then how have you been getting on without him?"

"Deuced badly, I can tell you, and no mistake—and that's what has brought me out this morning. I took up with a young chap named Colton—the biggest blackguard you ever came across in your life," answered Farley, in a tone

of mingled vexation and disgust. "I really couldn't stand him more than a week or so—though, for the matter of that, he couldn't me either, and only saved me the trouble of kicking up a shindy with him by giving me the sack, as I might say. So I'm now going to look after another fellow—a sort of a fiddler, who, I'm told, is a steady-going man, with no nonsense about him. I can't abide your low drunken humbugs, that can't see a public but they must be rushing in, and think of nothing but lush, lush, lush the live-long day, and are never anything but half muzzy. It does aggravate me to that extent, you've no idea. Now that's what I liked about Raymond. Ah, he *was* a chap! Well, you're off?"

"Going my way?" demanded his friend, as they prepared to leave.

"How the dickens can I tell which way you are going? City-ways or westwards?"

"I'm going towards the New Road," answered Braxford, with a significant wink and a dry laugh. "Just going on a little law business—not on my own account, you understand, but for somebody who would be just as much obliged to me for letting it alone. It is

a neat affair, and has cost me a good deal of trouble."

"But these things had best be kept dark, sometimes," said Farley, with a slight answering laugh, seeing he hesitated. "It's best not to be too inquisitive on these occasions. I hope you'll find the gent at home, ready to receive the invitation of his sovereign, like a loyal subject. I'm going in the other direction. Good-bye!"

"Well, good-bye," responded Braxford, offering a large hand encased in a still larger Berlin glove of dubious hue. "See you some time during the week. The old lady, your maternal parient, is all right, I suppose?"

"Blooming, thank you," replied Farley. "And the missus—well, I hope?"

"First rate," said Braxford, with a good-bye nod.

And they parted, each going his way.

CHAPTER III.

RAYMOND'S HOME.

IT was a raw, cold, disagreeable August morning, very unlike the generality of August mornings. The sky was overcast with dark gray uncompromising clouds, with a ray or two penetrating, like a sly smile, here and there. There was a heaviness over the atmosphere, a mist hanging over everything, as if it were October or November. Everybody seemed ill-humoured, and either trotted along, looking neither to the right nor to the left, or stepped briskly, affecting a gaiety they were very far from feeling.

Turning down a dull, old, shabby-looking street, which diverges from the Blackfriars Road, we find ourselves opposite to a queer, dirty, tumble-down house. It has an aspect the reverse of inviting. It speaks of miserable

dinners, of blighted hopes, of decayed fortunes, and blinks with a bleared and languid rather than a despairing gaze at the wall facing it, which has a remarkably ugly physiognomy, all broken out into an irregular, poverty-stricken eruption of yellowish bills and posters. The windows are grimy, for there is apparently no object in cleaning what is neither looked at nor through, for as no stranger ever passes down the street, of course there is nobody either to stare or be stared at. There are children playing, though they create none of that uproar of noisy mirth ordinarily noticeable in a group of little ones at play.

Stumbling upstairs, on pausing at the top, the way is barred by a singularly dingy door, behind which voices may be heard, neither sweet nor pleasant in their tones. A female is speaking in a querulous, vexed accent above the rest.

“Don’t keep plaguing me. My goodness, can’t you keep quiet for once in your lives? I never get a moment’s peace with the pack of you—troublesome brats that you are. Go and play.”

A whimpering responds to this latter in-

junction. Then a pretty childish voice says pitifully—

“But we are *so* hungry, mother dear.”

“Well, if your father brings home anything, you shall have some dinner. And if he doesn’t, you must go without, that’s all—there,” answers the female, crossly.

“We had no dinner yesterday,” says a boy, in an under-tone.

“Don’t bother me. You worry my life out, you plaguy set, and I so ill. Here’s a piece of bread to divide. Go and play.”

And the door opening, four or five little children are huddled out and down stairs.

Taking the opportunity of entering, we behold a poor, shabby room, with a square deal table before the window, a few broken chairs, a bit of tattered carpet on the floor, and a harp standing in one corner. The mother of the starving little family is sitting in a chair, her head leaning on her left hand, which is supported by the elbow resting on the table. Her figure is thin, her face haggard, her dress tasteless and wretched and slatternly. The expression of her visage is repellant in the extreme. Talk of old age lining the face with wrinkles, or sorrow de-

stroying beauty and freshness. I will back, a thousand to one, ILL-TEMPER against either, for doing the work of both in half the time. Age will often give a majesty, a grace which sometimes amply atones for the loss of youth, sorrow may lend a dignity which will forbid criticism on its otherwise fatal effects; but Ill-Temper, O ye gods! what havoc, what wrinkles, what scars—ineffaceable, irremediable—not to be subdued by any amount of Kalydor or Circassian cream—does it not plough! How it runs telegraphic lines of crossness between the forehead and nose! How it drags down the corners of the prettiest mouth, and takes the light from the most lustrous eyes! Verily, it is the evil genius which transforms the finest young prince into a Beast, and converts the loveliest belle into a Troutilla.

This woman, who is in reality about thirty, but who looks ten years older, remains for a long time in the attitude of lazy discontent into which she had dropped on huddling the children out of the room. She was ill and cross, and determined to conceal neither ailment. Yet she had been once pretty, coquetish, wheedling, with eyes like twin stars, a

voice like music, and a hand and arm which a duchess or a painter's model might have envied. Raising her eyes, which had been bent on the ground, she looked out of the window, and up at the patch of dingy sky above, which seemed gathering its strength for a down-pour of rain which should last the whole day and night.

"Just fifteen years," she muttered, savagely, "just fifteen years to-day since our marriage. A pretty anniversary! Cursed be the hour when I took him instead of his brother Guy! But how was I to know that he was such a poor spiritless creature? And to think that I might have had my carriage and servants, and a grand house, instead of being buried here, dying inch by inch of hunger, married to a fool who can't get bread for himself, much less for me. I *hate* him. And then to think of that day when I was taking in that score which he got to copy—and for which he was paid six shillings, forsooth!—when I was going into the shop, being hustled aside by *his* wife, in her silks and laces, and her servant opening the door of her carriage, with its luxurious pink silk squabs and lolling little dog, which probably eats more in a day than I or my

children get in a week. What a proud detestable woman! I loathed her from that moment. And that insolent music-seller, all smiles to her—of course; all impertinence to me—of course. O, of course. For was not I a poor famished-looking, shabbily-dressed creature, whose husband was existing on what was almost charity, while she was puffed up with eating, and pleasure, and pride? Suppose he does bring home anything to-day—what then? Why, she would throw the sum to a dealer in flowers for a bouquet to carry to a concert, and think nothing of it. *Why* am I picked out to be so wretched, so forlorn, so cast out from all hope, while others flaunt gaily and insolently past me, and triumph, it may be, in my misery? Oh, what a life, what a life!"

She struck her hands violently together, and pressed them closely, while an expression of mingled rage, sickness, hatred, and despair crossed her face. Incipient fever seemed coursing through her veins. At length she laid her arms across the table, and leaned her head on them.

For some time she remained thus; then the door opened softly, and a man appeared on

the threshold. It was Raymond, the street harpist.

He stopped on seeing the attitude of his wife, and then stole towards her with sedulous caution. On reaching her, he peered gently down, to ascertain if she was asleep.

"Well?" she said, turning round her face with that abruptness which startles us so much when we imagine that a person is sleeping.

"My poor darling!" said the harpist. He drew over one of the ricketty chairs, and sitting down beside her, attempted to take her hand.

"Unsuccessful again, I suppose?" resumed his wife, lifting her arms heavily from the table.

A look of deprecation was the response, as if poor Raymond dared not venture to speak; but his apparent emotion only seemed to inspire his wife with rage.

"Always, always, always," she cried, raising her arms above her head, and clasping her hands as if she wanted to drive the nails into the flesh. "No matter. It will not take much longer for us to starve, and then we shall be gone. O, what a life of wretchedness! O, what despair! O, what slow-consuming

agony and madness! Day after day——” She began walking to and fro, in an unsteady, irritating way.

Raymond rose, and going towards her, tried to take her in his arms and press her to his heart. “My poor darling!” he said.

“Let me go,” she exclaimed, shaking him off enragedly. “What is the use of nonsense like that? It’s all very well to look sorry and uncomfortable. Of course I know you *are* very sorry and uncomfortable; it’s not very likely you’d be glad. But what good does your being sorry do, when you can’t get work to do, and when your hand is still too weak to play? Let me alone. I am very well as I am. I am hungry, sick, and wretched. I am dying, so no matter. You will not have me much longer to keep you in a worry. So much the better for you. O, how I wish——”

She paused abruptly, as if frightened at what she was about to say.

Her husband sat down on the chair from which he had risen, and leaning his head on his open hands, seemed to reflect. For several minutes a deathly silence reigned in the sordid chamber, and then the noise of pattering feet was heard. The door was burst open

in the abrupt, unceremonious fashion peculiar to children who are not taught anything in particular; and the troop which had been dismissed half-an-hour previously, came in tumbling and scrambling.

"May we have our dinner now, mother?" demanded the leader, a bright, strong-looking boy of eleven.

His mother turned away, and the children began attacking their father, who had raised his head on hearing their approach.

"Hush, poor papa is ill," said one little girl, who could never learn to say "father," having been used to the more genteel appellation of "papa" before they came to live in this squalid neighbourhood. "His poor head feels so hot—O, *so* hot!" she added, putting her arms round his neck, and passing her small, dewy fingers over his temples.

She was about eight years old—fair, round, in spite of the hunger from which she had suffered during the last few weeks, and had long, tangled, curly, silken locks floating over her shoulders, and large lustrous black eyes,—the kind of eyes which, as unsophisticated people say, "almost make you cry to look at them"—dark, profound, expressive orbs. She

was her father's pet, and her sympathy seemed to touch him nearly.

"You want your dinner, my lamb, my poor little Val," he said, squeezing her in his arms, and gazing fixedly into her fathomless eyes—and the tone of his voice was ineffably sad.

Val shook her head, but she did not like to utter an untruth. She scorned "tellingstories," because she thought it was cowardly, and because she knew her papa held in supreme contempt people who did not tell the truth. She loved her papa, but she did not care much about her mother, who did not mind so much adhering strictly and sternly to facts, and who was capricious, unjust, and passionate.

"You would be glad if some good fairy came and spread meat and potatoes on the table for us, wouldn't you, Val my own, my darling, my pretty one?" continued her father, as if trying to make her confess she was hungry.

Val smiled, and displayed a few snow-white teeth and the sproutings of others. But she would not speak, only looking at her father, on whose knee she was perched.

"Shall papa go and buy some dinner?" said the poor harpist, with a faint attempt at a

sickly smile, as he stroked the soft, peach-like cheek of little Val.

The bewildered child looked at him incredulously. She thought at first he was "making fun," but his aspect was so perfectly grave, not to say mournful, that the idea was inadmissible. She could only stare at him in perplexity, therefore, and wonder. The other children crowded round listening in silent amazement to this unexpected jocularity, marvelling what possessed their father, usually so serious and loving. But his wife, now sitting again in her discontented attitude, could not find patience to listen.

"What absurdity are you talking to the child?" she demanded, angrily. "What is the use of tormenting her? I daresay she is unhappy enough without being joked in that ridiculous, cold-hearted manner. I haven't common patience with you, and I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself."

"Say, Val, shall papa go?" said Raymond, without heeding his wife. "Say, my darling, my pet, my own, my lamb—shall I?"

He pressed her in his arms very tightly, and did not remove his eyes from her innocent face.

“ Say, say quickly, shall papa go and ask some good fairy to give poor hungry Val, and her brothers and sisters and poor mamma—who is so ill—to give them all some dinner? I shall say little Val told me to come.”

Val, who was naturally a gay, jest-loving child, though usually rather grave in her outward demeanour, nodded, as if it was a funny game they were playing.

“ No, no, say ‘ Go, papa;’ nodding won’t do. The fairies might not understand that,” said her father, who had some hidden motive for wishing to be sent forth by the voice of his child. “ Say, ‘ Go!’ ”

“ But I want you to stay here,” said little Val, who did not seem to appreciate the joke in its proper sense, or to be altogether without misgivings as to the reality of the fairëan existence. “ You are so often at home *now*, and you used never to stay at home. It is so nice. I don’t want you to go. I’d rather have you than dinner,” added the unconscious little hypocrite. “ Besides, there are no fairies.”

“ Hold your tongue, George,” querulously put in the mother of the little family. “ You make my head worse with the noise. I am scarcely able to hold myself up, I am so ill,—

and then to have this jabbering going on, without end or aim! It is selfish—utterly selfish.”

“You are only joking, father,” said Charley, the eldest boy, looking wistfully at him. “You don’t mean really that you could get dinner, do you, father? you are only saying that to amuse Val?”

His father looked at him sadly.

“I *can* and I will bring you home some food,” he said, rising. He pressed Val passionately to his heart, put her down, and then kissed his other two girls, Nancy and Amy, and his two boys. He snatched up his hat, and was going towards the door when his wife’s voice arrested him.

“Pray, on what fool’s errand are you bent now?” she sneered.

“To get food for you and my children,” he answered. And, without further remark, going up to her, he took her in his arms, spite of her resistance, and kissed her pale lips. In a moment after, he was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

GUY ATHERLEY.

A FINE, penetrating rain had begun to fall, not violently or heartily, but in a cold, cruel way, giving a thorough drenching. Only those who had urgent business to transact were out, and they wore a crabbed, buttoned-up aspect, defying you to extract a kind word from them. Everybody seemed in a combination to torment everybody else. Carts, waggons, and carriages got into inextricable confusion at crowded crossings, just for the purpose of malignantly keeping fuming groups of wet passengers waiting for a chance of rushing across; drenched curs ran between the legs of unhappy stout old gentlemen, when it would have been quite as convenient for them to go on one side; rapidly-gyrating wheels whirled, splashing mud over shabby garments

which could but ill bear additional brushing; umbrellas caught in other umbrellas, and brought cataracts of rain down on hats and bonnets belonging to parties who seemed already quite uncomfortable enough. It was as dark and as foggy as a day late in November, and exercised the most depressing influence on all who ventured out, and even on those who remained at home.

Among the latter were the members of a family, sitting at lunch in the back drawing-room of one of the houses in a street off Cavendish-square. The head of the family was a man of some forty years of age—a man who might have been called handsome but for the unpleasant expression of his face. A physiognomist might reasonably have arrived at a conclusion that he did *not* belong to the class who “do spend their days in doing goodly things.” He was one of those persons who never seem to look direct at anything, and whose eyes resemble a stagnant pool, casting back no reflection. But if he appeared to see less than others, he amply made up for this peculiarity by seeming to hear more than ordinary people. He never spoke except in short dry sentences, never had, most probably,

a confidential conversation with anybody—one of that order of persons who, as well as others can judge, never love honestly and warmly, but seek a wife with the attention one would bestow on looking for an upper servant, or with the view of borrowing a sum of money without incurring the disadvantage of being obliged to return it; the mere fact of consenting to lose their liberty by assuming matrimonial shackles being, in their eyes, sufficient recompense for everything.

The second personage in this establishment—for she was undoubtedly second, despite certain bold efforts for a change of dynasty—was Mrs. Atherley, consort of Mr. Atherley, a large, stately, insolent-looking woman. She had a fair share of beauty, set off to the highest advantage by an expensive morning dress, which, at the same time, betrayed at once extravagance and a disposition to venture a step too near to the edge of the precipice overhanging vulgarity. She was one of those people who never commit any original or spontaneous remark, lest they should afterwards be discovered to have been in error; and who check any outburst of feeling or of thought with an icy “Of course—of

course," uttered in that tone which makes the unfortunate recipient of the rebuke feel as though a cup of cold water had been dashed in their face—one of those people who, speak to them on what subject you will, invariably gaze at you with a steady glance, which seems to betoken that they are either wondering how you can talk such rubbish, or how much you paid a yard for the stuff of which your dress is made.

The third individual was a still, prim lady, sister to Mrs. Atherley. Thin, stern, imperturbable, disagreeable, Miss Agnes Cloudesley met the popular idea of an "old maid" completely. She was sharp in speech, she was fond of argument and of nothing else. An impertinent nephew, who had been disappointed in his expectations by her sinking her fortune in an annuity, had once said of her that she was "like a quiver full of arrows—not Cupid's arrows, certainly—and a stray quiver, too, for she had never had a beau attached;" the meaning of which absurd observation nobody ever succeeded in conjecturing. She always appeared to imagine that human beings were created for the sole purpose of rendering her life miserable; and might reasonably have

been likened to a modern edition of Egypt, with a locust-plague of troubles. There was no misfortune which she had not experienced. If you casually mentioned some mishap which had occurred to anybody, it immediately proved a key to unlock a whole Pandora's-box of histories—not historiettes—of mishaps of the like nature, but each much more severe, which had befallen herself. No one was grateful to her for the numerous successive benefits conferred by her on them; no one gave her any credit for the exemplary meekness with which she bore the oppressive burden of her cares and woes. Such a character, to my mind, is almost worse than one really bad. For whereas the latter is ashamed, and tries to conceal little defects of disposition, the former brings forth a mosquito-army of grievances to attack you, reiterating that you must be a hard-hearted wretch, or you would pity and console, while to attempt to offer pity or consolation is to give them the greatest insult they can receive. It appears such a doubly ridiculous idea to consider that they can ever be consoled, when their anguish is past healing. Her dearest wish, however, was to impress on everybody who had the ill-luck to come within her range,

that some secret of the heart, some romantic contretemps, had been the real cause of her never having been married, and to convey the notion that she was as susceptible and ill-used as she was lovely.

The fourth, last, and decidedly least person in this little domestic group, was a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, pretty, though yet unfinished—"like the young moon with a ragged edge, still in her imperfection beautiful;" but so fragile, so delicate in her beauty, that she reminded one of the porcelain-tower in Andersen's story, which was exquisite to the eye, but so brittle, a touch would have shattered it. It seemed scarcely credible that the child of so hard a pair should be so gentle, so soft, so timid, as this little Floretta appeared to be—a rose surrounded by thorns. Her blue eyes, her fair skin, her pale golden locks, smoothed back from a low, unruffled forehead, all gave an aspect which bespoke for her love and tenderness, even before you knew whether she deserved it. She had a younger sister, a contrast to her in every respect, who was staying with an aunt in Italy.

The party had concluded the daily ceremony of lunching, and were apparently meditating

the necessity of separating. Mr. Atherley rose, and taking a letter from his breast-pocket, walked over to the fireplace, where a small fire had been kindled in consequence of the dampness of the atmosphere. He was seemingly absorbed in the contents of the paper which he held, when Mrs. Atherley said, in a tone which his practised ear warned him portended something,—

“I believe, my dear, that your benefit is to take place this day week?”

Mr. Atherley, who had raised his eyes when she began, bent his head in the affirmative.

“Then, as Floretta and I shall be present, of course I shall want some money, my dear. None of my dresses are fit to be seen; and more especially, Mr. A., as my sister Julia and her husband are coming up on Wednesday, I would wish to be rather more particular than usual.” Mrs. Atherley, by the way, generally was so very particular in her attire, that it was difficult to imagine how she could contrive to appear smarter than was customary with her. “In fact,” she added, “I would not, for any consideration whatever, be seen shabbily dressed; and you know how remarking Julia is.”

Perceiving the presage of a storm, Floretta rose and vanished from the room, bitter experience having taught her, that though her parents loved her in a strange, fitful way, their hard, coarse natures would not spare her the unutterable agony of witnessing any dispute between them.

“How is it that you require money?” demanded Mr. Atherley, with a frown. “Did you not have a very large sum only ten days since, when you were preparing for Mrs. Algernon’s *soirée*?”

Mrs. Atherley darted at him a glance of fire.

“I tell you I want it,” she said, simply.

“And I tell you, ma’am, that you can’t have it,” answered her husband, returning to his letter.

She walked up to him, snatched the paper from his hand, crushed it, and flung it at his feet in a transport of rage.

“Can’t have it, indeed!” she exclaimed, in a tone of suppressed fury. “Oh! truly, I rather like that! It amuses me! Come, I want twenty pounds—give me twenty pounds directly! I know you have more than that in your pocket-book.”

He looked her full in the face, with his cold, icy, gray eyes. She returned the gaze steadily. They looked like two prize-fighters measuring each other's strength. Miss Cloudesley sat tranquilly at the table, slicing a piece of bread into infinitesimal morsels with a knife. A full minute elapsed, and then Mr. Atherley put his hand into his breast-pocket, and drew from thence a small pocket-book. Opening this, he produced four bank-notes, which he held silently towards his wife.

"Ah! that's a good soul," said she, taking them, and, after hastily glancing at the figures, placing the precious scraps of paper in her pocket. "Now you shall see how I will reward you by my appearance on Thursday next. You know, you foolish man, that you are as proud of your spouse's beauty as she is herself, and that is saying a good deal. By-bye till dinner-time."

With which farewell she vanished, smiling and gracious once more.

As she was leaving the room, there might have been seen advancing up the street, drenched, miserable, hungry, and forlorn, his clothes soddened with the rain, his boots like wet rags on his feet, his battered hat soaked,—in

an utterly wretched condition, in fact, there was to be seen coming towards the house poor Raymond, the harpist. His face was ghastly pale; his eyes glittered as if he were fever-stricken; his hands were thrust into his pockets and clenched tightly. He walked steadily and firmly, however, and with an air of fixed determination as if resolved not to turn back, when he would much have preferred going direct to Westminster Bridge and thence straight into the water beneath.

On reaching the door he paused. Mrs. Atherley was then sailing majestically upstairs with her four five-pound notes in her pocket. Poor Raymond, who, with less than a twentieth of that sum would have been raised to the summit of felicity, hesitated for more than a minute; then, with a sudden summoning up of courage, he seized the handle of the bell and rang a peal which startled Mrs. Partidge, the cook; Joseph Jones, the footman; Ann Grey, the maid; and Watkins, the page, or "boy in buttons"—startled them all to such an extent that they simultaneously started: the first in her kitchen, the second in the pantry, the third in the front top-room, and the last on the stairs leading from the drawing-room

to the hall. As Watkins was a few steps from the door, not many seconds elapsed before he flung it open. On the threshold, to his utter indignation and disgust, stood a shabby, miserable, wet object, looking neither like a tramp nor a begging-letter impostor, but suspiciously like a compound of both.

“Well, upon my word!” exclaimed the boy, viewing this person in astonishment not unmingled with doubts regarding the safety of the coats, hats, and umbrellas deposited in the hall. “Well, I never did! Not to-day, thank you,” he added, thinking that perhaps the party wanted to sell boxes of lucifer-matches on the “reduced gentleman” system.

And he was about to shut the door with as violent a slam as he dared, considering that Miss Agnes Cloudesley was suffering from a nervous attack, and might hear the echo. But as he was turning the door on its oily hinges, what was his consternation when the extraordinary object before him exclaimed in a loud tone, and with a manner which would have been haughty, had he been well dressed—

“Stop! Is your master at home?”

The page turned pale. “He *is* a robber, or perhaps a lunatic,” he muttered. “You can’t

see him," he said, aloud, and holding the door over as far as he could, while he expected to behold the objectionable individual put his foot forward to prevent its being shut, after the manner of aggressive tramps.

"I *must* see him," answered the harpist, coolly.

"You *can't*," rejoined the page, who wished that some of the older servants would come, yet valiantly determined not to be routed. "I *tell* yer, you can't. Now where's the good of goin' on like this?"

"Go upstairs and tell your master, Mr. Atherley, that a person whom he knows—tell him that Mr. George, whom he saw last in *the Cloisters*, wants to see him—*MUST* see him," said the unwelcome visitor.

He spoke in such a tone of authority that the unlucky page wavered, feeling perfectly convinced that the ragged "*objek*" must be a robber, but also convinced that he might possibly incur some unpleasantness by not carrying his message. How was he to know who his master might be acquainted with?

"Wait a minute," he said.

He shut the door, leaving the harpist in the rain, and went upstairs.

"If you please, sir," he nervously said, opening the door of the room where stood Mr. Atherley, who was now pondering alone over his letter, "if you please, there is a man as says he must see you—*must*, he says."

"A man?" repeated Mr. Atherley, "what kind of man?"

"A poor, shabby, dirty man, sir; looks like a tramp, just like, and yet speaks so grand-like."

"Indeed," said his master, "indeed! What does he want?"

"He says that—you go upstairs, he says, like this—flinging up his head, so—you go and tell Mr. Atherley, sir, that Mr. George, who belongs to the Cloisters, *must* see him," said Watkins.

"Insolent!" exclaimed Mr. Atherley. "Cloisters! what cloisters?"

"I d'know, I'm sure, sir. Only the cloisters at th' Abbey, that I'm aware of; leastways, unless it might be the sign of a public."

"Cloisters!" again exclaimed Mr. Atherley, turning fiercely—"cloisters! What name did you say?"

"George, sir," almost whimpered Watkins, who felt terrified at the manner of the gene-

rally calm "guv'nor," and who suddenly became possessed with the consciousness that all the blame would be laid on his shoulders if anything unpleasant happened.

"GEORGE! what does *he* want?" muttered Mr. Atherley, between his teeth, in an undertone, and with an oath. "Where is he?" he added, trying to subdue his rage.

"Oh, I shut the door on him, sir, if you please, you may depend," said Watkins, trembling with terrors which grew more and more undefined every moment.

"Tell him that I will see him," said Mr. Atherley, in his usual cold placid tone, as he sat down near one of the windows. He took from his pocket a strip of paper, on which was printed the programme of a musical entertainment to be given the next week at the Haymarket Theatre, and buried himself in its contents.

Watkins hurried downstairs and re-opened the door. Of course, when the guv'nor himself directed that the disreputable stranger should be admitted, the responsibility was taken off Watkins' shoulders. When he threw open the door, the "objek" was still standing where he had stationed himself, on the steps.

“Master will see you,” said Watkins, with an air in which was painfully mingled an effort at civility and a sense of unutterable disgust at the poverty-stricken “objek.” “Wipe your feet on the mat, please.”

Raymond did not answer, but followed the boy up the richly-carpeted staircase, and waited while the drawing-room door was being thrown open and his name announced as “Mr. George.” Then he walked in, and Watkins flew to the kitchen to relate the “most exterordinary okirense which had tranzpired.”

The harpist stood irresolute for a moment when the door was closed. He took off his hat and held it in his chilled hands, then put it on again nervously, grew white and red, and then leaned on the back of a chair for support, as if he were fainting, while Mr. Atherley read the second half of his strip of paper, folded it up and replaced it in his pocket without appearing to notice the presence of his strange visitor. Then he looked at him, but did not offer to speak.

At length Raymond, after gasping for breath, advanced a few steps, and stood opposite to Mr. Atherley—stood humbly, entreatingly.

“Guy,” he said, speaking as a man might

be supposed to speak when rapidly drowning. He tried to go on, but his voice failed him, and died away in a kind of rattling groan.

“Well?” said Mr. Atherley, in a cold, clear, frosty tone.

“It is sixteen years since we last met,” said Raymond.

“I know it,” responded the other, icily.

“I come—I want—how shall I—oh, Guy, my brother,—oh, Guy, Guy,—my wife and children are dying for want of food! I cannot get them bread, I cannot get work—I am unable to save them from impending starvation. My children have not tasted more than a few slices of dry bread yesterday or to-day, and to-morrow—and I know not for how long—I shall not have even bread to give them. Help me, Guy, for the sake of our dead mother, for the sake of the old days when we went fishing and racing and birds’-nesting in the old place at home”—he hurried on almost incoherently, as if dreading to hear the icy reply that was coming—“for the sake of the memory of the hopes which we used to confide to each other in the moonlight, for the sake of our happy, loving childhood. Help me, Guy,—*you* know my pride—you know what

torture it is to me to ask you for assistance, how it galls me to ask—to ask——”

The unfortunate man's voice trembled, and became extinguished in a rush of unshed tears.

“Of course; I don't doubt it. Lazy people who can't provide for themselves always say it galls their pride to ask other people for money. I suppose it is the proper thing to be done. Everybody can get work if they choose to look for it,” was the response to the appeal.

“What can I say to move you?” exclaimed George, in a tone of agony. “Guy, my wife—you and I were once rivals”—a flash of electric, baleful light was emitted from the eyes of Atherley—“we both loved Lucy. I gained her heart, and you vowed revenge. I know it, for you told me so that night, sixteen years ago, when you parted from me with curses on your tongue and in your heart, in the cloisters of the old Abbey. But, though you said all your love for Lucy was turned to hatred, and that you would gladly see her dying of want, you cannot surely have forgotten the old affection you once bore towards her. Guy, she is now dying of slow-consuming disease,

brought on by a life of privation, of sorrow, of anguish."

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined his brother, in a quiet tone, as if congratulating him on a fortunate event—"exceedingly glad."

"You do not mean what you say," hastily replied George, whose fingers twisted and worked round each other. "If you were to see her—so wan—so thin—so haggard. All her smiles and dimples gone,—her very voice has lost its music. The bright hopes of her youth have died out, and left ashes which choke her. She has now nothing to look forward to but—the workhouse."

"Ah," said the rich man, the favoured composer, the sought-after, caressed instructor of the divine art, who could command his own terms—"Yes. Few people realise the desires of their youth. Hope," he added, sententiously, "is very free with her promissory notes; but, alas! most frequently they are dishonoured. It is a wonder that the firm has not ceased to exist long ago; but the world is very trusting, let folks say what they will."

"I do not ask for myself," said George Atherley; "I care not what becomes of me,

but can I see those whom I love, who depend on me for life—can I see day after day pass, and see those beloved ones pining for want of food—for the commonest necessities of existence? Give me—give me even a few pence, to drive away the demon of Hunger till I can again work. For the sake of Lucy—give me what I ask.”

“For *her* sake I—will not,” frigidly responded his brother, rising.

“I cannot say, hear me for the sake of my children,—you know nothing of them. I have implored you in the name of our mother, who, dying, pressed you to her heart, and left me to your brotherly care,—I have implored you in the name of the woman you loved,—I now ask you, will you give me food for the sake of that pitying One who said blessed be the man who gave even a cup of cold water in His holy name?”

He bent forward, with outstretched hands, as if he would have knelt. His lips quivered, and the beseeching glance which he turned on his brother might have melted a heart less adamant—less steeled to suffering.

Mr. Atherley stood silently with his back to the fire. He put his right hand into his

trousers pocket, and shook something which jingled.

"Pray, how much would relieve you?" he demanded.

"Bless you, Guy,—bless you—my kind, dear brother. You owe me curses,—you give me blessings. You restore my children, who but for you must either have pined away for want of food, or have disgraced our father's memory by being thrown on public bounty."

And the poor fellow fairly burst into tears, and sank into a chair, sobbing for joy.

"How much did you say?" asked his brother, as if he had not caught his words,—thinking, at the same time, "What a maudlin fool he is!"

"Give me ten shillings. That will keep us for a few days—till my hand is right again," cried George, wiping away his tears of gratitude with his trembling fingers.

"Ten shillings," slowly repeated Guy Atherley, taking his hand from his pocket, and smiling. "If ten farthings would set you in affluence, I would pitch the coppers into the Thames, and you might go after them if you liked. So, brother George, Mister Ne'er-do-weel, as I have a very particular ap-

pointment to keep, I must conclude the conference, which I hope will not be resumed till doomsday."

He rang the bell without looking at the petitioner, who, having risen, was standing with a face which, though he scarcely credited what he heard this time, was as white as a sheet. In a moment, the footman—for Watkins declined further interference—opened the drawing-room door.

"Show this person to the street-door, and, if he ever comes again, I am not at home; and if he persists in annoying you by any importunity, give him in charge," said Mr. Atherley, sternly, yet with a visible effort.

George staggered after the man who preceded him downstairs. He was too much stunned to testify any strong emotion till he got out of the house, and down a quiet by-street. Then he leaned against a hoarding before some half-built houses, and yielded to a wild passion of grief—the grief of a deeply-sensitive man who sees only death or the work-house before the wife and children he would give his heart's blood to save from care or unhappiness. He did not know what to do; every door seemed closed against him. The

good-natured music-publisher, who, knowing him to be a reduced gentleman, had exerted himself to obtain for him scores to copy for the new opera which was being printed, and to arrange in parts for choruses and bands, who had kindly advanced him money even when he had not work for him—good Mr. Octave had found nothing for him to do for some weeks. His hand was disabled for more vigorous work than writing, and he could not get that to do. No friend could he ask to help him, for he had kept as much aloof as possible from the low comrades which his avocation as a street harpist would have led him into association with, his pride being as stubborn as his sense of honour was strict. The only one with whom he was intimate was Farley, the man who played the cornet on their rounds ; but he did not think for an instant of applying to him, for poor Farley drank away his earnings as fast as they were made, and was supported by a mother who took in washing. Yet, unfortunately enough, poor Farley was indebted to him about eighteen shillings.

His frenzy of grief having subsided, he plunged his hands into his pockets, and began to wander in any direction, it mattered not

whither. He dared not return to his little Val, to his poor Lucy, whom he loved as fervently as she hated him, and to all the unfortunate little starvelings awaiting him. He walked slowly until he reached the Strand, and listlessly loitered on. The rain was beginning to clear off now, and the vehicles were no longer intent on getting locked together in their hurry. People began to put down their umbrellas, and to look less crabbed. George reached Northumberland House, without knowing where he was going, and went thence down the busy thoroughfare. He looked into a jeweller's shop, though he saw nothing but dancing sparks, which seemed like glittering tears. Then he stared aimlessly in at a print-shop, where he saw a little child kneeling with upraised hands and eyes. Next he gazed at a window which was adorned with a blind on which were some golden letters forming the words "Society for the Relief of the Criminal Poor." And he was pondering over and admiring a picturesque assortment of cravats, collars, stockings, braces, and shirts, when——

What?

Who has not missed some fourpenny or six-

penny piece some time or other, for the disappearance of which they could never satisfactorily account? It was not spent, it certainly was not given away to the mite of a child who appropriates so many of our odd fourpences and sixpences. But some day we accidentally put our fingers into some unfrequented pocket, and light on a piece of silver which has come there we know not how. We puzzle ourselves over the coin, until the remembrance of our missing bit of money flashes across us. It was not lost, it was not spent, it was not given away : it was placed inadvertently in this pocket which never received before any of our pecuniary resources.

'This happened to George Atherley, otherwise George Raymond. He had missed a sixpence some time previously, for his sixpences were not so numerous that he could not account for the destination of each. He now put his hand idly, vacantly, into a pocket of his coat, and by the purest accident came on a small round something, which he drew forth incredulously,—a button, perhaps, a morsel of card, which he had cut out to amuse Alfred, his younger boy. No—neither button nor card wheel, but—

A sixpence!

Frantic with joy, believing secretly, I think, that some good angel or some compassionate fairy had placed the silver gift beneath his fingers, George flew recklessly towards Drury Lane. In less than three minutes he had reached a baker's shop, and had bought a half-quartern loaf; then he darted to a cheese-monger's, and bought half a pound of cheese with the remaining coppers. With light and joyous footsteps, he walked as fast as if he had been walking for a wager, until he reached the street where he lived.

The rain was quite over now, and the sun was shedding a warmth which proclaimed that August was not yet over. The sparrows were arranging little boating parties and excursions to come off immediately down the street, and they chirped and chattered to such an extent, one would have imagined they were a little bird Parliament, and were determined to make as much noise about nothing as they could manage with their voices.

Raymond knocked at the door, which was opened by the woman of whom he rented his two miserable rooms—a quiet, kind, sorrowful little woman, who had been deserted by

her husband, and left with an only child, which had died of consumption. He nodded with a cordial "Good day, Mrs. James," and ran up stairs.

The children were sitting languidly round the table, trying to amuse themselves silently. Val was leaning her head against the wall, evidently sick and miserable, but she was the first to hear the door open, and to see her dear papa. She sprang up, and shaking the hair from her eyes, ran towards him.

"Val, my darling, my birdie, I have brought back the dinner I went for, though it is not a very splendid one," cried her father, joyously, and absolutely laughing. "Come, my boys and little ladies, you shall have your dinner for to-day, and the Good Shepherd will provide for us to-morrow. Where is mamma?"

"Lying down," answered Val, resting her languid head contentedly against her father's shoulder, as he began to cut the bread and cheese into equal portions for the children, leaving apart some for his wife, though he took none himself.

"Is mamma ill again, darling pet?"

"Yes, papa. Her head ached," said Val,

her brown lustrous eyes fixed on the dainties laid within her reach.

“Poor mamma!” said George, sighing heavily. “Come, Val, your brothers and sisters have nearly finished. Begin, my pretty bird.”

So Val took her slice of bread and morsel of cheese, and, with the elasticity of spirit peculiar to a child, soon forgot her languor and sickness in the now unaccustomed delight of eating, though the fare was somewhat of the scantiest and roughest.

CHAPTER V.

LADY BOUNTIFUL, EN AMATEUR.

WHILE George Raymond was with his brother, Lady Charrington was sitting in her boudoir, —an apartment containing such a perfect bewilderment of pretty things and elegant draperies that it was a sight worth the trouble of walking from Sydenham to South Kensington on a hot summer's day for the privilege of contemplating its beauty. If, as has been asserted, the character of a person may be detected by the arrangement of their own peculiar sanctum, then, judged by this criterion, Lady Charrington's character was that of a whimsical, enthusiastic, yet indolent nature. Books, rare plants, toys, portfolios, queer antique curiosities, and the newest freaks of French inventive genius, lay scattered about in most admired disorder, yet combined, after a fashion, by a graceful fancy.

Lady Charrington was one of the loveliest of Belgravian beauties. She was beautiful enough for the heroine of a novel, for a Hebe or a Diana, for a picture of May morning, to have been a reigning toast in the days of powder and patches ; of which fact she was perfectly aware, without being insufferably vain, or jealous of rival belles. She looked scarcely more than seventeen, yet she was six-and-twenty, and had been married nine years. She was a little under the middle height, very fair, with a piquant, attractive countenance, and a profusion of beautiful tresses, arranged in the latest fashion. Spiteful people insisted that her hair was red : her admirers maintained that it was the purest auburn, a kind of rich gold colour ; and nobody could agree as to the exact hue of her eyes. Her little white hands were models of beauty, and her slender feet might have made Cinderella or Rhodope sigh with envy.

She looked the impersonation of youth, beauty, and aristocratic grace as she sat before her embroidery frame, her little taper fingers moving dexterously over a fast-blooming group of wool and silk flowers. She had paused to consider the relative merits of two skeins of

azure silk, when the door opened, and a lady appeared on the threshold.

“Good morning, Kate,” said Lady Charrington, looking up with her peculiarly bright smile.

The lady advanced with a responsive smile, and bending affectionately over the beautiful countess, kissed her on the forehead, and answered, in that tone which penetrates right to the heart,—rich, full, musical,—

“Good morning, my dear Geraldine.”

Lady Kate Venayne—Lord Charrington’s sister—was a personage of quite a different style to Geraldine. She was about thirty-eight, but looked seven or eight years younger. She was tall, slender, and not particularly striking in appearance, though there was a sweetness, a “something” impossible to describe, which, like her voice, went direct to the heart, and made a conquest at once. Her hair was dark brown, her face was pale and transparent, with brown eyes of unfathomable depth, and a mouth which had always a melancholy expression. She had not the least trace of gaiety in her countenance or movements, not the slightest vestige of that summer glow which seemed to surround her sister-in-law

like rays of sunshine. Everybody knew the reason of her gravity. Nine years before, it had been arranged that she and Geraldine should be married on the same day; and they were both looking forward, with very different anticipations, to the destinies awaiting them. Lord Charrington was then a little over fifty, a fine, hearty, unromantic, good-natured English lord, passionately loving the girl of seventeen, who did not, at that time, care as much for him as she did for her pet poodle, but who liked the brilliant position he offered her. Kate's betrothed, Major Sir Charles Auddesley, a gallant soldier, thirty years of age, was a noble hero, and was then fighting in India, winning laurels less for the sake of glory and reputation than for the happiness of laying them at the feet of her to whom he had given his heart. Six weeks before the wedding-day, when they were expecting the arrival of Kate's bridegroom, news came that he had been slain in a desperate encounter with the Sikhs. So there was no double wedding after all, and the Lady Kate Venayne was an old maid, though she had since received several eligible offers.

Lord Charrington, it may be mentioned, had

another sister, but she had, some ten or twelve years before this, contracted a marriage, of which he so entirely disapproved that he had discarded her from his favour.

“How is your head this morning, my dear?” inquired Kate, stroking the golden locks which lay like sunbeams on the temples of her beautiful sister-in-law. “You suffered from a head-ache when you came home last night.”

Lady Charrington smiled, and leaning back in her chair, caressed the soft hand of this quiet old maid. She lightly touched a slip of paper, which Kate held in her other hand.

“A subscription list?”

“No—I might say with truth, when I consider what it really is, no, *unfortunately*,” answered Kate. “I came to visit you with a very mercenary motive, however. I wish to say a few words to you with regard to this memorandum—if you have time to attend to me.”

“I always have time to attend to you,” replied Geraldine. “I often wish I could seriously help you in your good works, and could be of more use in the world; but it is such a bore to be worried by tattered old women and ugly children, who won’t even look picturesque.

Perhaps if I were a despotic sovereign with power to make laws, or if I were old and forbidding and benevolent, I might do something philanthropic—I might become enthusiastic about some of your humble friends. But, alas—heigho! enthusiasm is quite incompatible with teaching shabby school children, or making flannel petticoats for old women.”

“Enthusiasm is an excellent courser, but a very indifferent pack-horse,” replied Kate, with an almost imperceptible smile. “However, with regard to this case, it will not require much enthusiastic interest. You recollect Charrington mentioned in his first letter from Scotland that when he was driving to the station his horses became frightened, and nearly ran over a child, which was rescued by a street musician?”

“Yes—yes.”

“This poor wretch has been perfectly disabled from work since, and his family is on the verge of starvation.”

“Kitty!” exclaimed Lady Charrington, in a tone of horror, “he is thus rewarded for his efforts in saving my lord?”

“Yes,” answered Kate, sadly; “his hand has been severely injured—twisted in some

way, and for weeks he has been unable to gain the miserable pittance which has hitherto supported his young family."

"How much do you think he earns by his street performances?" inquired my lady. "I think you said he was a street musician?"

"On an average he makes—or made—about thirty shillings a week. He plays on the harp."

"Thirty shillings a week!" echoed Geraldine, looking up. "Thirty shillings! No wonder the unfortunate creature is reduced to such straits. Why, I could not buy a box of gloves for that!"

"Yet, my dear Geraldine, if he could insure that sum regularly for himself, his wife, and his five children, he would consider himself a happy man indeed. It is because this precarious income is suddenly withdrawn that he is reduced to his present distress. Five or six weeks lost, or occupied with poorly-paid, odd tasks of copying or arranging music, would speedily bring a family dependent on the exertions of one person to a very wretched state."

"Why did not the poor creature apply to Lord Charrington? I must write to Scotland," rejoined Geraldine. "Why did not you tell me this before?"

“ You must not be hurt, for I learned of the destitute condition of this family only yesterday. Mr. Adams, the secretary of our visiting committee, discovered the case by accident, and drew my attention to it, requesting me to do something for the unfortunate man and his children. I intended to have relieved them, and then mentioned the matter to you, for I know your dislike to the practical details of charitable schemes; but I have met with unexpected difficulties in pursuing my benevolent plans, and I have been obliged to come to you for counsel.”

“ For counsel, my dear?” replied Lady Charrington, laughing slightly. “ It will be quite a novelty to find myself in so dignified a position as that of chief counsellor to Kate Venayne. I fear I shall grow terribly conceited. Nevertheless, whatever my large range of experience may suggest is perfectly at your service, my dear child.”

“ In endeavouring to help this poor man, I am met by an unusual difficulty,” resumed Kate, looking down at the little piece of paper which she held. “ This common street-musician, who lives by gathering halfpence from ragged crowds, has feelings very singular for one of

his class. He is proud, for he was formerly a gentleman, and he will not accept assistance in the ordinary way."

"Is there a history attached to this unfortunate man, then?" asked Lady Charrington, a little eagerly.

"I have not learnt his story, for it is almost impossible to glean anything regarding him. Mr. Adams has told me the few details he has been able to gather."

"But you have not offered to help him, Kitty?"

"Mr. Adams has done so. He did not mention the case to me for some time, considering that I had already enough to attend to; nor did he know that Charrington could take any interest in it. Having devised and rejected various plans, he at length resolved to send him some money anonymously. He enclosed five pounds in an envelope, as a loan, desiring him, if he needed further assistance, to call at Perring's, the perfumer, in Regent-street."

"And the result?"

"— was so extraordinary that I scarcely expect you to credit it. This man — this Raymond — received the gift, or loan; he

repaired instantly to Perring's, and asking to see the master of the shop, showed him the note and demanded if he knew the writer. Poor Perring, I verily believe, was terrified by his wild manner, and stammered that he did ; when our starving musician flung the envelope and its contents on the counter, and walked away without further remark."

"And without leaving any message?"

"These lines were written as a kind of post-script to Mr. Adams' note: 'George Raymond thanks the donor of this gift, and begs to say that when he needs charity he will know how to ask for it.'"

"What a fool the man must be—and his children starving! It almost makes one angry."

"At that time he had still something to do, and thought that he would recover in a week or so. Now, however, it is a different matter. I have been seeking for some means of relieving him, but in vain ; for I cannot devise a way of giving relief without wounding his feelings. He is a strange character for a street-musician. The difficulty is to help him, yet avoid the quicksands of his indomitable pride."

“He ought to be only too happy to obtain food for his children,” observed Geraldine, almost indignantly.

“He will not take alms——”

“Even when he hears his own children crying for food?”

“I cannot argue; I can only represent the affair. Some people would rather die than be indebted for life to the charity of others; though certainly they have no right to involve helpless children in the consequences of their pride. It was by the merest accident that we heard of the case.”

“It is absurd—ridiculous. He must be assisted, even against his wish,” said Lady Charrington, after a moment’s pause. “That is one reason why I have never helped poor people; they always give one such trouble. However, this is an exceptional case. I owe this man a kindness, for he saved my lord from being severely injured, perhaps——” she shuddered.

At this moment a servant entered with a card for Miss Venayne.

“Mr. Adams,” said Kate. “Shall I see him here?”

“Yes—oh, yes.”

Mr. Adams presently appeared: a sober-looking, business-like man. He bowed courteously to the two ladies, and waited for Miss Venayne to speak her wishes.

"I have succeeded in enlisting the sympathies of Lady Charrington on behalf of the poor man, Raymond, Mr. Adams," said Lady Kate. "She is as anxious as we are to befriend him in some way."

"Have you discovered in what way I can be of any assistance to this poor creature and his children, Mr. Adams?" asked the Countess, benevolence lighting up her beautiful blue eyes.

"I have, madam," replied Mr. Adams, in his customary tranquil manner. "I have thought of a way in which, without offending his susceptibilities in the least, we can help him. He is one of the worthiest persons whom I have ever met with—for I have thoroughly investigated his character, though he is perfectly unacquainted with me or the interest I take in him. He is glad and grateful when he gets anything to do. His unfortunate accident disables him for some time from pursuing his usual avocation as a street performer. It is to be desired that we do

something for him which will be of more permanent benefit than merely giving him assistance to tide over a few weeks; but it is so difficult to give permanent employment to a man who simply plays well on the harp, and has neither connexions nor original talent. However, once he recovers, he will be able to help himself, as he has done hitherto."

"But your plan?" inquired the Countess, who did not care for dissertations, statistics, political economy, or scraps of philosophy. She wanted activity, and to pursue the romantic and novel.

"My plan is simple enough. I believe, Lady Charrington, you generally order all your music from Messrs. Octave and Piccolo?"

"Yes, yes. But proceed."

"Mr. Octave takes a special interest in this poor man, and has obtained several little things for him to do. He would get him tuitions, only there are so many disadvantageous circumstances operating against this Raymond that he could not accept them. He gave him some work to do while preparing this new opera for publication, but that is now finished. He sometimes sends him to the British Museum to write out old chants and

ancient music from manuscripts there, for Lord Crowley, who, as you are aware, is making a collection. Mr. Octave, in fact, gives him all the assistance in his power, but, of course, he cannot give, nor would Raymond accept, more help than these odd employments from time to time afford."

"But your scheme—what am I to do?" said Lady Charrington again, a little impatiently, though always speaking with the utmost sweetness of manner. She was growing a little tired of Mr. Adams' prosing.

"Well, madam, since Mr. Octave gives him music to copy and to arrange sometimes, and pays him for it——"

"I could do the same?" interrupted Lady Charrington. "What a clever idea, Mr. Adams! Of course I could. Yes, now I think of it, I have a quantity of ragged sheets of valuable music which I must have written out fair immediately. I had an idea of doing it myself, but every time I attempted it the task seemed so interminable that I abandoned it in despair. I ought to be very much obliged to you for the suggestion, as I wanted to have it done, yet was too lazy to go briskly about inquiring for somebody to do it."

"The idea is a very good one," said Kate Venayne, smiling. "It will spare his pride, while rescuing his children from starvation or being thrown on the parish."

"And give him an opportunity of honestly earning his livelihood as he has hitherto done," said Mr. Adams. "You approve of this plan, Lady Charrington?"

"Most cordially. What shall I do first?"

"As you permit me to dictate to you, you will repair, if you please, to Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's, and mention that you wish to have this music copied out. I know that Mr. Octave will send it to this Raymond, and, as he is a liberal man, will pay him well. The rest is easy."

"Admirable. I will go this afternoon and speak about it. Here is the music in question," she added, rising and going to a curious old cabinet. Unlocking one of the drawers, she drew forth a bundle of music which she had used at school, and never even glanced at since her marriage. "It is in a deplorably tattered condition, but it is really valuable, and being partly in manuscript, and much of it brought from abroad, I cannot replace it otherwise than by having it re-written."

She rang the bell.

"I shall require my brougham in half-an-hour," she said to the servant who answered the summons.

"You are not afraid of taking cold, Geraldine?" said Kate, glancing at the fast-falling rain.

"No—oh, no. I am so impatient!"

Mr. Adams rose to depart.

"I am so glad this matter has been settled," said Lady Charrington, with one of her most captivating smiles, as she held out her hand to him.

Mr. Adams took the little pinky fingers in his capacious palm and respectfully pressed them; while he looked at her beautiful face. Who could gaze unmoved at that joyous countenance, glowing with pleasure and universal charity? He bowed to her and to Kate, and then went away.

Lady Charrington flew to her dressing-room, and in twenty minutes, marvellous to relate, was ready to set out on her mission of mercy. She wished Kate to accompany her, but, as usual, Kate had one of her dull prosaic appointments to keep with the manager of some Orphan Asylum or Dorcas

Society, so could not comply with Geraldine's desire.

In ten minutes—that is to say, just at three o'clock—the brougham stopped in front of Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's music establishment in Regent-street. The shop was deserted, for the day was so perfectly dismal that nobody had ventured out. As Lady Charrington passed through the plate-glass doors, there emerged from behind an embankment of harps, pianofortes, brass instruments, and huge music-books, a tall, spare, agreeable-looking, middle-aged man.

"Good morning, Mr. Octave," said my lady, in her smiling way.

"Good morning, madam. A terribly wretched afternoon; quite like November, upon my word. What can I do for your ladyship this morning?" blandly inquired Mr. Octave. "Shall I send your ladyship a selection of the new songs from 'Geraldine?' These were published only this morning. We have some copies exquisitely illustrated by Brandard. Here are some beautiful airs, sung by Madame Garcia. They have been greatly praised by all the leading papers, and are very charming."

“Thank you,” said the Countess. “Yes, you can send me the principal soprano songs; I have heard them. But I came for a different purpose to-day. Could you find any one to copy some music for me? It is chiefly in manuscript, and has been so much injured by time that I cannot use it now. Do you know of any person who copies music very neatly?”

“Certainly, madam,” returned Mr. Octave. “I can get it done in a style with which I think you will be satisfied.”

“And at once?” resumed Lady Charrington, “for I leave town shortly, and wish to take it with me.”

“It shall be ready whenever your ladyship desires. How many sheets are there, may I ask?”

“About sixty. I have left the parcel in my carriage.”

Mr. Octave despatched one of his young men to fetch the parcel, while he showed her ladyship some of the new music. She selected some pieces, and then said—

“You will let me have a few sheets of this music when copied, Mr. Octave, in order that I may see the manner in which it is done.”

“Your ladyship shall have the first copies

on—let me see, this is Thursday—on Saturday morning.”

“Very well. And I desire that you will not stint in the price you give.”

Mr. Octave bowed.

“Good morning, Mr. Octave. The title-page to that set of quadrilles is rather pretty.”

“I am glad it pleases your ladyship. Shall I include the piece in the packet you have selected? You do not care about it? Good morning, madam. The rain is clearing off, I think.”

And my lady, the Countess, smilingly stepped into her carriage, and drove away in a highly philanthropic frame of mind.

CHAPTER VI.

VAL WANDERS INTO FAIRYLAND.

It was between six and seven o'clock. Raymond was amusing his children by making shadows on the wall with his fingers, in the sunlight. Their mother was still lying down in an adjoining room; indeed, she had not risen since George came home. With the natural elasticity of children, both boys and girls were laughing and chattering; while their father, catching the contagion of their mirth, could not feel unhappy when he had those bright dancing eyes and sparkling white teeth glittering about him. Val was standing behind him, both hands resting on his shoulder, her eyes fixed half gaily, half inquiringly on the mysterious shadows. He had just raised a shout of delight at two successful delineations of a goose and a fox, when a tap

was heard at the door. Charles, the eldest boy, answered the knock. Mrs. James, with her kind, sad face, appeared on the threshold.

"If you please, Mr. Raymond," said she, in her mild way, "there's a gentleman below who wants to see you."

Raymond started, but instantly dismissed the absurd notion which darted through his brain; for why should his brother regret his unkindness and send for him?

"A gentleman, Mrs. James?" he said, calmly. "Would you be good enough to ask him to come up? No, I'll go to him."

"Never mind, Mr. Raymond," replied the landlady; "I have to go down, bless you! It will be no trouble to me to tell him to come up, none in the world."

Raymond glanced round his poor apartment, with a sense of humiliation, but he stifled the feeling and advanced to the door.

In a minute after, a young man—one of Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's attendants—entered the bare little room. He nodded kindly to Raymond, which was a condescension; but he was a good-humoured fellow, without much false pride about him.

"Good evening, sir," said Raymond, hand-

ing one of the rickety chairs for him to sit on, which the visitor declined, preferring to perch on a corner of the table. The poor harpist was surprised at this unexpected visit, for he had never been so honoured before. Mr. Octave was very good-natured and considerate, but he did not ordinarily treat him with much ceremony.

The children withdrew to the end of the small room, and looked shyly and admiringly at the finely-dressed gentleman. Val mentally decided that she "liked him;" Charley whispered that he *was* a tip-top swell.

"Mr. Octave has sent you some music to copy," observed the young man, handing George a roll of paper. "If you could have a few sheets ready by Saturday morning punctually, he would be glad, as he has promised to let the lady to whom the music belongs have a specimen by that day. She's very particular, and wants it done in regular out-and-out style. I've brought you the ruled paper to write it on, and here's a sov. in advance, as Mr. Octave—you understand——" He winked, but the joke, whatever it was, missed fire, for Raymond was looking at the roll of paper, and mechanically received the offered coin. "So

you comprehend—you're to copy what I leave you, at the usual rate, and when that's finished we've some more. In fact, there's a regular batch—fifty or sixty sheets."

"Very well," answered Raymond. He dared not say more; indeed, he was almost stunned at his unexpected good fortune.

"So, remember—the first sheets on Saturday morning, as early as you can. A few will do. I had the deuce to find out this place, by-the-way," remarked the youth, carelessly. "It's a good step from Regent-street, and I live at Brompton. However, it doesn't signify. What a pretty child," he added, glancing admiringly at Val, who leant against the wall in an attitude of unconscious grace; "as pretty as a fairy. What splendid eyes! Come here, my dear."

He looked so good-natured that Val advanced immediately, pleased by the expression of his face and his friendly smile. He slipped his hand into his pocket and drew forth a small silver coin, which he dropped into the bosom of her frock. Val sprang back with the offended air of a princess, but a second thought convinced her that her new friend meant no deadly insult; so she looked up shyly, while securing a dignified retreat.

“Good evening, Raymond,” said the young man; “I must be off as quick as I can.”

“Good evening, Mr. Sylvester,” answered Raymond. “I am very much obliged by your kindness in coming to me. I went to Mr. Octave yesterday and he had heard of nothing for me, so I am very glad to receive such a good thing as this will be.”

His visitor went away, accompanied as far as the street-door by Raymond, whose heart was full nigh to bursting. Then the harpist ran upstairs and unrolled the music, on which he gazed with eyes suffused with tears. He stole softly into the next room, where Lucy was lying on the bed. She was awake, but her eyes were shut, and she would not open them, although she heard George approach, and had heard Sylvester talking. He fancied that she was asleep, so he crept noiselessly away, and carefully closed the door, lest she should be disturbed.

Taking his hat, he ran out, and presently returned with some mutton chops, a little tea, milk, sugar, butter, and bread, with which he made a feast for himself and the children, laying aside a portion of the dainties for Lucy. Then he cleared the deal table, put it before

the window, drew up a chair, enjoined silence on the children, and began his task.

Hour after hour struck, and George did not cease working. Lucy came in at length, and deigned to partake of the food left for her. At eight o'clock the children had gone to bed, —the girls in one of the small back rooms, the boys in their little attic. Lucy, considerably softened by the appearance of returning prosperity, displayed an anxiety to talk, and grumbled on in a fashion which would have altogether impeded the progress of another man, but which only seemed to make George's pen fly faster over the lines. He was a skilful and rapid copyist; the characters which he produced on the paper were exquisite specimens of music writing; and he soon had the satisfaction of having a little pile of finished sheets beside him.

Fortune was smiling on the house once more. By Friday night George had accomplished the greater part of his task, in a really faultless style. As he contemplated his work, leaning his weary head on his clasped hands, his heart felt so full that he could not restrain the tears which silently rolled down his thin cheeks. He thought he was unobserved, but in a few

moments, a pair of soft arms stole round his neck, and a sweet murmuring was whispered, as if from the fairies to him.

“My pretty, pretty Val,” he muttered, laying his head on her shoulder.

“Poor papa!”

And that was all they said.

Saturday morning came; and George had nearly completed his work. He put up the music, and tied it carefully in a sheet of brown paper.

He called Charley, his eldest boy.

“Now, Charles,” said he, “you must take this parcel to Messrs. Octave and Piccolo—you know the place. You must take great care of it, for it is very valuable. Val, would you like to go for a walk?”

Val blushed with pleasure, for she did not go out very often. She glided to her papa’s side, and put her smiling face up for him to kiss.

“Well, then, put on your bonnet, and away with you. I need not tell you to be steady, Charley, for I know you are an old soldier. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye, papa. Good-bye, mamma.”

Lucy looked up from an old novel which she had borrowed from Mrs. James, and replied

“Good-bye,” carelessly. “Be good children, and don’t get into mischief.”

Charley and Val set forth, with that air of gravity, so ludicrous when assumed by children. Charles was a strong, well-grown boy, of some eleven or twelve years of age. He formed a striking contrast to the exquisite little fairy who tripped beside him. Despite her mean dress and shabby bonnet, Val looked like a child of good birth—like those children in stories who are amazed at finding themselves in tatters when stolen by gipsies. Poor Raymond, although he had long been in the habit of earning thirty shillings a week, had so many to feed and clothe, that he found it difficult to maintain the respectability he desired to preserve; and Lucy was a slovenly, negligent manager, so that the children were untidy and badly dressed when they might have been neat and trim.

It did not require much to unlock the tongues of these young mortals, whose only griefs came when their mother was out of temper or their father out of luck. It was marvellous to hear their chatter, from the Blackfriars-road to the Strand, and from the Strand to Regent-street. Every gay and

tempting shop window they came to, they would stop for a few minutes, and point out to each other what they would buy if they were rich. It was about twelve o'clock when they reached Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's.

Mr. Sylvester, who was in the shop, recognised the pretty child he had seen on Thursday evening. His dignity of course would not admit of his acknowledging any acquaintanceship, but he smiled benignly, and came forward.

"So, my little man, you've brought the music from your father?"

"Yes, sir," answered Charles, who, as his father's messenger, had already the honour of being on speaking terms with the great Mr. Sylvester.

Mr. Sylvester took the parcel; then opened it, and examined the sheets of music with a critical eye.

As he was looking over the music, Val timidly crept up to the end of the shop, where a lady was trying over a piano. The lady was Floretta Atherley, who had come with her father to choose a pianoforte to be presented to her on her birthday.

Although so young, Floretta was an excel-

lent pianist, and fond of music. Her touch was at once firm and delicate, and her reading of the compositions she played, clear and intelligent. She continued running over one piece after another, while her father went into Mr. Octave's private room, and she did not for some time notice the flushed, eager face of her little auditor. At last she chanced to look down, and saw Val gazing at her with an expression of rapt attention.

"You are fond of music?" said she, smiling at the little stranger.

Val shrank back, red as a peony with shame.

"Don't be afraid. Do you sing?"

"Yes, sometimes," answered Val, hesitatingly.

"Do you learn to play?" The instant she said this she regretted having asked so foolish a question, which sounded like irony, addressed to so shabby a child.

Val shook her head. Poor little thing, there was not much opportunity for her to learn anything. She clasped her hands, and looked beseechingly at Floretta.

"You want me to play something more—is that the meaning of those eloquent glances?" And the mild Floretta, whose greatest pleasure

was to please others, touched the piano again, playing her best this time.

“Now, look here—do you know the way to Carlton-house Terrace?” asked Mr. Sylvester of Charley, as he took a slip of paper, and scribbled a direction. “You do? Well, then, could you take this packet to the house of the lady whose name I’ve written—‘Lady Charrington, —, Carlton-house Terrace?’ That’s a good lad. And here’s sixpence to buy cakes to eat, if you go into the Park. Come, don’t be a fool—take it. Your sister’s safe to be hungry, if you’re not. That’s right. Now, get along, for the Countess wants the packet this morning. Wait to see if there’s an answer, and if there is, come back with it, you know.”

Mr. Sylvester was generally pretty free with his odd sixpences, but the especial reason of his liberality on this occasion was, that it happened to be his business to take the music to Lady Charrington; and, as the day was growing more and more sultry, he did not care to take a dusty walk just then. He thought that in all probability there would be no message, and that Charley would do pretty well for an errand-boy.

Charley bowed a good morning, and trotted away with Val, who was very reluctant to depart, though she offered no audible objection. Floretta bade her little friend good-bye, and kissed her, for the young girl was naturally flattered by the unaffected admiration the child had testified for her playing.

The children soon reached Carlton-house Terrace, and discovered Lord Charrington's mansion. Charles marched up to the servants' entrance with the air of a Government courier carrying despatches, and rang the bell. One of the maids opened the door.

"Any answer?" inquired the girl, as a matter of form, taking the parcel.

"I was told to wait to see if there was," replied Charley.

"Very well. Sit down there."

The packet was consigned to a tall, haughty functionary, who occupied some position in the social world between that of Lord Chamberlain and running footman. That dignitary bore the parcel majestically to the ante-chamber attached to my lady's boudoir, and handed it to Georgette, my lady's personal attendant, who carried it to her mistress.

My lady was working at her embroidery

frame, immersed in deep reflections on an intricate pattern, and had completely forgotten about her ragged music and her benevolence. Georgette placed the packet on the table at her side, and withdrew noiselessly. Presently my lady's bell tinkled.

"Is the messenger waiting?"

"Yes, my lady."

"I wish to see him."

Charley was rather alarmed when informed that my lady desired to speak to him. But being, from his education, pretty free from any superfluous shyness, he assumed a bold air, and taking his sister's hand, marched after the footman. Val, who rarely quitted home, and whose imagination was quick, while her experience was small, was filled with ineffable admiration and terror on coming to the suite of rooms leading to my lady's boudoir. Everything was so grand, so like the fairy palaces she had read about in story-books; the rich carpets, the subdued light, the soft atmosphere, the plants and birds, the draped windows, the mirrors, the statues, bewildered her. She scarcely dared to look up, yet her eyes instinctively glanced at the beauty and splendour around her. At last she stood at the

door of my lady's boudoir. Her gaze became rivetted on the lovely Fairy Queen who sat within that elfin bower. Poor Val was certain that this was all a dream.

"Who are these children?" asked Lady Charrington, looking at Val and her brother.

"The persons who brought the parcel for madame," answered Georgette, with a slight gesture of disgust.

"They are singular messengers for Messrs. Octave and Piccolo to choose," observed the Countess, pushing back her frame, and looking at the boy and girl. "Come here."

Fido, her pet Italian greyhound, advanced and sniffed disdainfully at the ankles of the youthful visitors; then, apparently satisfied that the children were not worthy of attention, he returned and nestled on his cushion, resuming his almost daily occupation of tearing up his mistress's handkerchief. Charles, whose courage had totally deserted him, timidly stepped forward. Val, who had forgot her fears in her admiration of the Fairy Queen, remained near the door.

"There is some mystery here," said Lady Charrington. "You do not look like an

authorised messenger, boy. Are you one of Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's people?"

"No, ma'am," answered Charley, in a frightened tone, as if she had charged him with being a thief.

"One of his men desired you to carry this parcel here. Is it not so?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. Tell me how this happened. I am not offended. You need not be afraid."

"If you please, ma'am, I took home the music that Mr. Octave sent to my father to copy, and Mr. Sylvester—I don't mean, ma'am, that I took it home, but to Messrs. Octave and Piccolo's—and if you please, ma'am, he told me to bring it here, if you please, ma'am, and so I did bring it, and I hope you're not angry, ma'am."

"Angry? No. You are, then, the son of the Mr. Raymond who copied this music?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is that little girl your sister?"

"Yes, ma'am. My sister Valentine."

"Come here, Valentine." Lady Charrington had an artistic taste, and the beauty of the child caught her fancy. She noticed the look of dreamy admiration in the little girl's face,

and, singular as it may appear, she was gratified. The expression of the sentiment was so honest, so real, that she could not resist the sensation of pleasure it afforded. "What are you thinking of, my dear?"

Georgette was horrified. Such a thing had never been heard of before during the course of her eight years of service. Georgette was twenty-three, and piqued herself on her knowledge of the etiquette of domestic life. She had hitherto imagined that her lady was almost as well informed as herself on all points of etiquette and propriety; and now to see her behaving in this manner. The shock was too great. Maids have their feelings; but mistresses ARE so callous. The idea of asking that little wretch what she was thinking of—as if it signified whether the miserable creature ever thought or no! It was unheard of—abominable.

Lady Charrington, unconscious of the displeasure of her maid, repeated her question.

"Nothing, ma'am," answered Val, trembling.

"That is not much. But what besides? Why do you look so fixedly at me?"

"Because——"

"Because what? Do not be afraid, child."

"I was thinking if this was really——"

"Was really—?" repeated Lady Charrington, smiling.

"I dare not say, ma'am."

"I will be angry if you do not, child," responded Lady Charrington, rather imperiously this time. She was not accustomed to wait.

"I was thinking if this was *really* the place where the genii live, and if you are really the Queen of the Fairies," answered Val, quickly, before she could deliberate further, while she looked as if she would very much like to run away. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke, her feelings having mastered her. Lady Charrington, who understood what was passing in her mind, smiled at the naïve remark. Georgette drew herself up with the aspect of a martyr.

"Why should you think me the Queen of Fairyland, my dear?"

"Because—because——" An instinctive sense of delicacy told the child that she must not put her thoughts into words, and say, "because you are so beautiful and so finely dressed." She stopped, therefore, and grew

pale. Lady Charrington did not press her to speak further, but fixed her eyes on the little one, and examined her appearance minutely, to the infinite embarrassment of the child, who felt an undefined sense of awe. Lady Charrington was one of those people who, rightly or wrongly, form their likings or dislikings at first sight. She never paused to reflect whether her judgment was correct, but trusted to an instinct which, after all, seldom deceived her. She did not pause to analyse her sensations, but something attracted her towards this little girl ; she wished to know more of her, for she was apt to take sudden fancies.

“Is your father better, little Val?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“These children always make the same answer. How old are you, my child?”

“Eight, ma’am.”

“You must say My Lady,” interrupted Georgette, acrimoniously.

“Do not interfere, I beg, Georgette. Do you know how to read and write?”

“Oh yes, ma’am—my lady.”

“What else can you do?”

“I can sew, and—and cut paper ornaments, and knit, and do crochet, and dance——”

“A long list of accomplishments. Have you any sisters, and any brothers besides this one?”

Val glanced at her brother, and blushed ; then told Lady Charrington the names of her brothers and sisters. She felt encouraged by the kindness of the grand lady.

“Give these children some refreshment, Georgette. They look tired. Good-bye, Val.”

The Countess extended her hand towards Val, who took it and pressed her lips to the delicate fingers. The child was perfectly bewildered ; nevertheless, there was an indescribable grace in all her gestures that was irresistible.

“I must see that child again,” thought Lady Charrington, when once more alone. “She is charming and original—very charming. I wish Kate had not been out. Crimson is very showy, but pink is exceedingly delicate for a border,” she added, bending over her pattern. “Certainly, she is very pretty. Pink—I must ask Kitty’s opinion. Poor child, what a shame to dress her so badly!”

CHAPTER VII.

LADY CHARRINGTON MAKES A PROPOSITION.

PROVIDENCE had sent help in time, for the pain in George Raymond's arm, instead of abating, grew worse. The mental anguish he endured kept equal pace with the increasing bodily torture. What a prospect for his wife and children if he were laid up! Dwelling on such a contingency was enough to drive him mad, yet he could think of nothing else, by day or by night. An atmosphere of the deepest gloom pervaded his home, for Lucy withdrew to an impregnable fortress of silence from time to time as she contemplated the approaching want of means. George tried to divert the current of miserable ideas by occupying himself with his children ; but when he went out—as he daily did, trying to find something to do, or to take some necessary exercise—the

little ones were hustled down to the street to play. Lucy knew that it made her husband wretched to see his children playing with companions of whom he knew nothing, and in this vagabond way ; but she always had a ready excuse.

Charley and Val had related the adventure which had befallen them ; but though it ought to have occurred to their father to connect the name of the lady whom they had seen with that of the nobleman who had been partly the cause of his unhappy accident, he did not. Preoccupied, torn by conflicting emotions and maddening ideas, he could think of nothing but his impending miseries.

“I must go to the hospital and see if something cannot be done to allay this torturing pain from which I suffer, and which prevents me from playing,” said George to his wife, some weeks after Val’s adventure.

“You ought to have gone long ago,” drily answered Lucy.

“Yes, it was a piece of folly to neglect it. However, I have resolved on what course I shall pursue.”

“And what might that be?”

“I shall go to the hospital, and while I am

under medical treatment, I shall——” He made a long pause; then resumed slowly, “The gentleman who was in the carriage the day I was hurt gave me his card, and told me if I wanted help, to write to him. My love for my children is stronger than my pride. I will send to ask him to do something to lift me over the dark time. It must be done, for there is no other resource.”

He buried his face in his hands and wept bitterly. Even Lucy was touched. It is a dreadful thing to witness a man’s tears at any time, but under such circumstances, doubly terrible.

A long and painful silence ensued, broken only by the smothered sobs of poor George. Lucy bent her eyes on a child’s frock she was mending. At length the clock of Christ Church struck twelve.

“I must go at once,” said George, rising. “I will go first to the Free Hospital. When I return, I shall write a letter to this gentleman.”

He sighed heavily as he left the room to remove the traces of his storm of grief. He presently returned, and found Lucy leaning her head on her left hand, looking very melancholy.

“After all, this pain may be nothing,” said he, with an affected cheerfulness. “I should not have allowed it to go on unchecked. We shall know the worst in an hour.” He kissed her and went away.

Lucy was still sitting in the same position when he came home at the expiration of two hours. She saw by his face that the result of the examination was more serious than he had anticipated. His step, never very elastic, was heavy, and his expression that of a man utterly crushed. He seemed twenty years older since morning.

He sat down, without taking any notice of Lucy, and did not speak for more than ten minutes. Then he said abruptly—

“Where are the children?”

“They are at play,” answered Lucy, who trembled so much she could scarcely command her voice.

To her surprise, and, indeed, trepidation, George made no further remark, though she knew he was aware that they were in the street. She wondered he had not seen them as he came in.

“What did they say to you at the hospital?” she inquired at length, frightened by his silence.

"It is worse than I anticipated," gloomily answered George. "I must go into the house, for the injury has brought on an attack of erysipelas. It will be weeks before I can get about at all. I have acted with the utmost folly in neglecting the injury, weak, procrastinating fool that I am! Have we any paper? I want to write a note."

"To the gentleman who——"

George did not reply, but opening the table-drawer, began rummaging over the things therein. He discovered a few sheets of letter-paper; so, taking the pen and ink-bottle from the chimney-piece, he began writing. When he finished, he folded and wafered his letter without speaking, though he saw that his wife followed all his movements with an anxious eye. Finally, he tossed over the contents of the drawer to find Lord Charrington's card, in order to write the name and address.

"Call Charles," he said, after looking at the card.

Lucy put her head out at the window, and screamed to the children to come in. Presently they came, like a flight of pigeons up to a dove-cote, only they arrived prosaically by the stairs.

“Charley,” said his father, “what did you say was the name of the lady you saw at Carlton-house Terrace?”

“Lady Charrington, father. Mr. Sylvester said she was a countess.”

“She must be the wife of Lord Charrington,” said Raymond, half to himself. “It is a singular coincidence that she should be the means of my obtaining work, yet know nothing of the circumstances which reduced me to my cruel situation—probably knows not of my existence. They seem both very kind. Charley, you must take this letter to the house of Lord Charrington, and leave it. Walk slowly, and sit down for a little while in the Park, to rest before you come back, for the day is hot—I feel quite feverish. You will wait for an answer, my boy.”

Charley took the letter, and set off as fleetly as a young greyhound. Hot or cold, wet or dry, it did not make much difference to Charley. He was a fine lad, with an ardent spirit, and a self-confidence that augured well for his future advancement in life. It had been his fate not to receive more than a slovenly, unequal training, for his parents had always been cramped by want of means; but

George Atherley was himself pretty well educated, and at spare moments gave his children snatches of instruction, which would afford them some groundwork for future teaching. Charley was in the habit of looking over the books at stalls, and had from time to time invested odd twopences and sixpences in the purchase of tattered volumes, over which he pored when in a studious humour, repeating the striking passages to Val, and reading over with her his favourite pages. The neighbours wondered that the harpist did not put Charley out as an errand-boy, instead of letting him idle about as he did, and as he was getting such a big boy now. Raymond, they considered, was a "queer stuck-up sort of chap, and thought a deal too much of himself."

Lord Charrington had returned the day before from Scotland. He was at home when Charley arrived; so the letter was carried at once to him. He read it, and then went to seek his young wife.

"This poor man whom you and Kate have been assisting, my dear Geraldine," said he, "is undoubtedly the unfortunate wretch who was injured in saving a child from being run over by my horses. The poor creature has

been disabled from work, and is reduced to asking the help he shrank from so long. He is obliged now to go into the hospital. A wife and five children are dependent on his exertions for the necessities of life, and he seems to be in a state of the bitterest despair. I am bound to see that his family do not suffer. Poor fellow! I am really very sorry. What a coincidence that you should have assisted him without knowing that I was indirectly the cause of his distress!"

"Why, my dear lord, we did know. That was the chief reason of my interest in him," said Geraldine.

"Ah, I was not aware of that. But we must see immediately what is to be done."

"He is going into the Free Hospital. His wife and children need support during his absence from home," answered Geraldine, in a perfectly business-like tone. "It appears to me that it will be very easy to manage the matter. Send them down to one of your cottages at Yeovil, and let them stay there till the man recovers."

Lord Charrington pondered for a few moments. "He says that his eldest boy is capable of taking some light situation, and that his wife

is an excellent needle-woman. If they are disposed of, there will be only four children to take care of."

"The eldest girl is a charming child—pretty, original, and fairy-like. You remember I told you of her coming with her brother, in charge of the music her father copied. I should like the child to stay here for a few days. I want to see if she justifies my sudden penchant. She can be placed under the care of Georgette, who is accustomed to take charge of my pets and playthings."

Lord Charrington, who was accustomed to his spouse's habit of taking fancies, made no reply to this proposition, merely observing, "I must send an answer to this poor fellow, for his son is waiting."

"The boy who came here the other day?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. It is arranged, then, that we send Raymond's wife and the younger children to some nook in the country. I find a situation, if possible, for the eldest boy, and you commit the eldest girl to the care of Georgette? Mademoiselle will scarcely thank you for the whim, if I do not misjudge her."

"Yes, I feel very sorry indeed for the unfortunate family, brought up thus, and scattered

thus by a sudden mishap. What miseries there are in the world!" With which remark, my lady the Countess turned again to her colour-box and flowers, forgetting the maladies of human life in the tranquil pleasure of creating a brilliant floral group in her album.

Lord Charrington, returning to his study, sent for Charley. The boy, who did not know the nature of the errand on which he had been despatched, his father having been too much preoccupied to explain it to him, entered with a bow and a blush. The benevolent nobleman put several questions to him with the view of ascertaining whether the family were really deserving of help, and then directed him to tell his father to call at the Carlton Club at four o'clock on Saturday.

Charley, who did not feel embarrassed in presence of Lord Charrington, as he had been with the Countess, bowed again, and retired.

"Poor wretch!" thought Lord Charrington, looking again at Raymond's letter; "he seems in a terrible state of despair. It was a most unfortunate accident, and nobody can regret it more than I. I must do what I can to repair the mischief. As for that young boy, he ought to be sent to school, not to a situation."

CHAPTER VIII.

LUCY GIVES HER OPINION.

PUNCTUALLY at four o'clock on Saturday, George Raymond was at the Carlton Club. Lord Charrington received him very kindly, and expressing great regret for what had happened, proposed his arrangement.

"How long are you to remain at the—the Free Hospital?" he inquired.

"From six to eight weeks, my lord," replied George, in a half-stifled voice.

"Well, we must do what we can to help those dependent on you. You clearly understand what I propose doing? While you are laid up, your wife and children can stay with one of my tenants in the country. Lady Charrington will take your eldest daughter for the present. As for your eldest son, he can go with his mother. He is too young to do

anything but learn lessons for some time to come."

Raymond turned aside, and apparently gazed intently into the street. When he spoke, his voice was so husky that his words were hardly intelligible.

"I will not attempt to thank you, my lord, for the help you give. It is impossible for me to express to you what I feel, yet I am choked with the gratitude that rises from my heart to my lips. What can I say, my lord, to let you know how I feel your benevolence?"

"Say nothing about it and you will please me best. When are you going into the hospital?"

"As soon as my wife and children are in some way settled, my lord."

"That is to say, you are going at once. Do they give you hope of a speedy recovery?"

"They cannot judge at present, my lord. They will not say till I have been with them a week or so."

"Well, let us hope for the best. Tell your wife to be ready by Tuesday afternoon, when I shall send my carriage to take her and her children away. You will send the little girl

who came to my house some weeks ago—what is her name?”

“Valentine, my lord.”

“You will send Valentine to Lady Charrington’s maid. Are you satisfied with the arrangement?”

“Satisfied, my lord!” He could say no more, but buried his face in his hands. Lord Charrington spoke quickly to spare him.

“Very well. When you leave the hospital come to me. If I am not in town, apply to my butler—Armytage—with whom I shall leave directions. I am sincerely sorry for all that has happened—sincerely sorry, I assure you.”

George in vain essayed to speak. Twice he opened his mouth, but no sound issued from his parched lips. His throat seemed filled with burning sand. At length he said, simply, “Good day, my lord. May the blessing of the husband and father whom you have befriended in his despair attend you!”

“Good day, Raymond. I hope you will have regained your strength in a few weeks. When you come to me I will do something for you, be certain.”

George went away, and turned towards

home. He walked slowly, for the day was excessively sultry, and he felt intensely melancholy. The idea of his little Val being separated from the family stung him with a bitter pang. She was his darling, his pet, his little friend and sympathiser; and it seemed to rend him in twain to lose her even for a short time. He was alarmed, too, by Lady Charrington's sudden fancy for the child. It was an indefinite alarm, but none the less poignant.

Lucy was very well satisfied with the arrangement, though she could not avoid feeling touched by her husband's utter misery. She resolved to cheer and rouse him if possible.

"I'm sure, George, I don't see why you should be so disconsolate. Now that it *has* happened, let us make the best of it. I hate to see a person always looking at the dark side of everything, and grumbling, and finding fault, and wanting to pick and choose, and objecting because they haven't everything they would like to have. How many a man has been run over or badly hurt one way or another, and had nobody to help him, while you are taken in hand by a rich lord! What is the use of hanging your head, and looking as if something dreadful was going to happen? If this

nobleman is as good as he seems, he may do a great deal for us. And there's his wife taking a fancy to Val. Why, the child's fortune's made if she will only try to make herself agreeable—an effort she is not particularly fond of making. I have heard of great ladies being so pleased with a child, when they have none of their own, that they have adopted it, or left it a fine legacy; and how do we know but this lady may have no children? It looks as if she had none, from her taking a fancy like this. Now suppose she were to adopt our Val. It isn't impossible."

George shuddered. Her words gave his fears a definite shape.

"Do not speak of such a misfortune," he said.

"Misfortune! Why, what in the world can you do for the child? I'm sure if this Lady Camerton——"

"Charrington."

"Well, Channington—if she were to take Val——"

Her husband put his hands against his ears, and shrank back as if he had been stung by some venomous insect.

"To take from me what I love best in the world!" he muttered.

"Oh, I have long known that you have not much room in your heart for *me*. However, that doesn't alter the matter in the least. I think it is extremely selfish in you to make any objection. Of course you like that child better than anything else——"

"My dear," said the unfortunate harpist, "you know that I meant——"

"Certainly, my dear, I know your meaning only too well. But if you will allow me to continue, I think that you are not acting as you ought, in standing in the way of Val's advancement."

"It appears to me, Lucy, that you are arriving at a conclusion rather prematurely. I hope and trust that Lady Charrington has merely offered to place Val with her maid through a feeling of benevolence."

"Then why does she take her from her brothers and sisters, if she does not think something particular of her? It is my opinion that she means to do something for the child; and you ought to be very glad of it."

George sighed heavily, wearily, but did not

answer. Lucy ran on, representing the manifold advantages which would arise from such grand people taking an interest in the family. Her words fell on unheeding ears, for her husband was immersed in his own painful thoughts.

“I’m sure it’s very kind of Lord Channington to take charge of me and the children while you are laid up. Many a person would have just given you a ten-pound note, and thought himself exceedingly liberal. Of course I wish it hadn’t occurred, but after all it may be for the best. At the same time, I feel quite unhappy at the idea of your being obliged to go to that hospital. But you will be out again soon, so we must not fret and fidget. I can’t endure people who eternally try to look on the bad side of things.”

“Say no more about it,” interrupted George. “Here are the children.”

CHAPTER IX.

POOR LITTLE VAL.

TUESDAY was a melancholy day in the little family of the poor harpist. The clothes of Lucy and her children had been easily packed, and Mrs. James, who had become attached to the little ones, and who liked George, though she never could overcome a kind of repugnance towards his wife, good-naturedly agreed to allow them to leave their few chairs and other properties in her back kitchen. The family were to return when George left the Free Hospital, if the lodgings were then vacant.

At two o'clock, Lord Charrington's travelling carriage drove up to the door, and Lord Charrington's own man alighted—he could not be induced to merely get out after the manner of ordinary mortals—he always “alighted.”

George carried out the box which held all that his family required, and a parcel containing Val's limited supply of frocks and stock of linen. Lucy came forth, accompanied by her children, and stepped into the vehicle, bidding her husband a hasty farewell.

"After all," said she, "it's only for a few weeks; we shall be together again very soon. Good-bye, my dear. It's not as if we were going to America; though I'm sure you look as if we were leaving for Timbuctoo or the Mountains of the Moon."

George did not answer. A terrible foreboding of evil struck a chill to his heart, and he dared not trust himself to speak. Val, who was not going with her mother, nestled clingingly by his side, the big tears stealing down her cheeks. Lord Charrington's valet remained, part of his duty having been performed, and as the carriage drove off he turned to George.

"I suppose this is the little gurl whom my lud requested me to take charge of?" he inquired, with a politely supercilious air.

George hesitated for a moment. He felt as if every second were precious now. He

pressed Val's little hand with a vice-like grip. At last he replied—"Yes."

"Aw, vewy well. She is to come with me, as you have been infawmed. If yaw will be kind enough to call a keb, I can wait heaw," said Lascelles, stepping into the passage with the view of sitting in the parlour.

The poor father humbly obeyed, and in a few minutes returned with a cab. He silently lifted his darling into it, and placed her small bundle beside her.

"Sir," said he to Lascelles, with a frightful tremor in his voice, "will you permit me to go part of the way with—with my child?"

"Aw—well, I have nothing to say—aw—yas—if you like. Only you must leave us befoa we weach owa establishment," responded Lascelles as he stepped into the cab himself.

The drive was a dreary one. Val, who was sensible enough to see that her tears distressed her father, remained perfectly silent. She laid her head against his shoulder, and the only sign of emotion was a perceptible shiver which ran through her frame at intervals. As for George, his fixed look, never turning on the little girl, told nothing of his feelings. Mr. Lascelles withdrew behind the shelter of

his own dignity and the contents of a crimson-covered betting-book, until they reached Pall Mall, when he desired Raymond to leave them. The harpist, looking, for the first time since they started, at his child, pressed her closely to him, and whispered—"You will never forget your poor father, mine own, my pearl?"

"Never, never, never, papa, dear, dear papa!" responded Val, the tears streaming down her cheeks at last, as she clung to him. "But I am coming home soon again, am I not?"

"Yes, yes, I believe so—I trust so! Good-bye! Do not forget to say your prayers to-night, and pray for papa and mamma and all of us." Then he quitted her with a last kiss.

My lady received her new plaything with delight. She never tired of prattling to her and fancying she discovered fresh beauties in the untutored darling. Poor Val was too frightened to speak much, or to venture on more than monosyllables; but as little girls never expect their dolls to respond when chattered to, the Countess did not particularly notice the silence of her new pet. She exhibited her with an almost ludicrous pleasure

to Kate, who was unable to display an enthusiasm commensurate with the occasion, her feelings being more profound and less easily aroused than Geraldine's. Lady Charrington was very much disappointed at this indifference, and could scarcely resist giving Kitty a scolding. However, as she was afraid of venturing on such a novel enterprise as flying into a passion, she thought it wiser to ignore the coolness of her sister-in-law.

She kept Val sitting on a cushion at her feet until half-past five; then she dismissed her, as Georgette appeared at the door, and she was obliged to go and dress for dinner. She gave her maid special directions that Val was to be at once attired in the height of fashion and in expensive materials.

Singular enough, my lady's fancy for Val lasted through several weeks without diminution. The child appeared to twine herself round the heart of the fashionable lady, with a thousand unconscious winning ways. Her docility, her softness, her anxiety to please her patroness, were so many links to unite her to the capricious Geraldine, and even to gain a sort of supercilious kindness from Georgette. Arrayed in fine dresses, and decked out like a

little queen, with the most faultless taste, her beauty was most striking.

“She is charming,” said Lady Charrington to Kate, some weeks after Val had been domiciled in the household. “I wish I could keep her altogether. I would give her a really good education, superintended by myself—you needn’t laugh, Kitty; you are so spiteful—so sarcastic. But I really do think I shall give her some rudiments of training, even now. She knows how to read, and can write rather prettily for so young a child; she stitches neatly, too, and picked up the idea of embroidery the other day, though she has, of course, done nothing as yet. What a shame and a pity for such a child to be destined for a life of poverty and misery! for her father can never do anything for her.”

She looked significantly at Kate, as if desirous that she should make some suggestion, but Kate remained obstinately silent.

“I wonder,” she slowly resumed, “if her father—” She paused, as if afraid to go on. “People have adopted children before now, you know. Charrington would not object to anything I might wish for. Do you understand what I mean?”

“You mean that you would like to take this child from her parents and give her an education unsuited to her future prospects, and at last probably get tired of her and turn her off to gain her living as she might.”

“You always speak so plainly and sharply, Kitty; I don’t like it. And if I do give her a fine education, why can’t she become a governess, or something of that kind, if she doesn’t marry some meritorious young man?”

“It appears to me that you are talking very foolishly, Geraldine,” answered her sister-in-law, coldly. “If you were not so fitful in your likings——”

“How dare you, Kitty! Never mind, I know you don’t mean it. We will talk of the matter some other time.”

Lady Charrington turned away with a cloud of indignation on her brow. She, however, began carrying her idea partly into effect by setting Val impossible tasks, and being vexed that her young pupil could not manage them, she scolded at first a little, and ended by growing tired of her and flinging her into the charge of Georgette within a fortnight. That young person, who was supremely jealous of every new pet her mistress took a fancy to,

was not sorry to find her throw off this one; still, she was not ungenerous to the fallen star. She tolerated her, and did not scold her more than a dozen times every day.

Fortunately Val had been accustomed to being knocked about and rated hourly by her mother, so her present situation was not so irksome to her as it might have been to a more tenderly cared-for child. She missed her father, and brothers, and sisters greatly, and moped a good deal, of which nobody took any special notice. She also missed the wild liberty to which she had been used. She generally sat in out-of-the-way rooms, trying to keep out of everybody's path. The loneliness was very oppressive, and often the poor child sobbed herself to sleep in her little bedroom. She saw Lady Charrington only by chance; sometimes, when peeping with child-like curiosity over the stairs, she would behold her sweeping down to her carriage. She struck up a prodigious friendship with one of the housemaids, whom she assisted in carrying pails, brooms, and dusters, to the manifest detriment of her new silk frocks; the girl, in return, favouring her with a kind word now and again, and not unfrequently even with a

morsel of cake, or bits of sweetstuff, or scraps of pie.

The child had an instinctive liking for elegance and luxury, so she was never astray in the grand house after the first few days. One would have imagined that she was born heiress to a great estate, and that the whole establishment belonged to her. Not that she assumed "airs," but she had the mien of a little princess.

From being lonely, Val felt, as many other solitary children have been, impulsively drawn towards books. The good-natured housemaid had some tattered old-fashioned novels and plays, which Val sometimes secured and pored over, with the consent of Peggy. She, of course, did not understand a tenth of what she read, yet her delight was inexpressible at roaming through the halls of Udolpho, or creeping after Adeline in the mazes of the re-echoing abbey. She could not very well comprehend the old plays, some good, some bad, which Peggy lent her, but still she devoured them, and she acted her favourite characters in them over and over again in her imagination.

She crept down one day into a remote corner of the conservatory, with three-quarters

of an old volume from Peggy's library, and ensconced herself behind a clump of cactuses and large shrubs, nestling down quietly, for she was rather afraid now of the grand lady who had been the means of her entering this house. For more than an hour she remained absorbed in her book, when a rustling of silk startled her. Looking up with a frightened aspect, she beheld Lady Kate Venayne.

"Do not be alarmed, my poor child," said that lady, with her mild, re-assuring smile. "You are as quiet as a little mouse here. I do not wish to disturb you. What are you nibbling at? 'The Provoked Wife!' Why, my dear, you cannot understand a book of this kind?"

"No—yes—ma'am. I—I only thought, ma'am, if you please——"

"It is simply a waste of time to read such works at your age. Would you not prefer to learn something useful, something that would be of service to you?"

Tears gushed to the eyes of poor Val, and hiding her face in her little hands, she sobbed as if her heart were breaking. Lady Kate kindly sat down, and drew the head of the

solitary child on her knee. A long silence ensued; then she observed—

“I did not intend to reproach you, Valentine. Why do you cry so bitterly? Will you not tell me? I wish to befriend you. Confide in me—tell me all about it.”

It was a long time before the child could command her voice.

“I cried because—I don’t know why.”

“Poor child! No matter.” Lady Kate Venayne could well divine the cause of the outburst. “Should you like to learn if any one were to teach you?”

A flush of joy irradiated the blurred face of Val. She seized the hands of the kind lady, and dropping on her knees, gazed intently on her.

“Do you mean that you would teach me, ma’am?” she demanded, in accents trembling from mingled emotions.

“I will try you if you like. I will give you a lesson of one hour every morning, and if I find that you improve——”

Val squeezed the lady’s hands between her own, and covered them with passionate kisses. Kate Venayne, who had seen many cases of lively gratitude which had not been borne out

by subsequent steadfastness, neither encouraged nor repulsed these eager tokens of joy. She stooped, and picked up the battered old volume of plays, and looked at the first page, whereon she observed inscribed, in the worst possible caligraphy, the name of "Margaret Porter."

She took the child's hand, and without speaking, led her to her own sitting-room. It was a pretty chamber, off her sleeping apartment, furnished simply yet elegantly. A pianoforte, a harp, a bookcase, a table on which were placed a desk and some papers, were the principal objects in the room. It was a cool, cosy, pleasant chamber, certainly not like the boudoir of Lady Charrington, but a most inviting spot to those fond of quiet and repose.

Kate laid the confiscated volume on a small side table, and then sat down beside the window, pointing to a stool at her feet for Val to seat herself.

The child obeyed, and Kate Venayne, who seldom sought confidences in vain, began to cross-examine her, in order to ascertain her capabilities. In half an hour she knew more of the hopes, the fears, the little aspirations and disappointments, the past and future con-

tained in that baby mind than any other human being had discovered. In ten minutes from the time she had entered the room, Val was prattling away as glibly to Kate Venayne as if she had been acquainted with her all her life. The little girl was unusually ignorant, even for a child of eight, but she was also unusually bright and quick. Her mind was a fertile soil, which would soon run to waste if neglected, but yield a rich crop if cultivated. Kate, who was penetrating, and who could calmly consider every opportunity of doing good without flying into absurd heroics on the subject, listened quietly to the little babbler.

“You will for the future come to my room every morning,” she said at last. “I will then tell you what you are to do during the day.”

“Will you teach me to play?” timidly asked Val, turning her eyes on the open pianoforte. Kate Venayne smiled.

“That is rather a premature request. I shall think about that,” she said, observing that her new protégée did not quite understand her. She rose, and approached the instrument; then, seeing the eager look of the

child, sat down and played. She first ran over some popular tunes, to gratify her, and then, half forgetting her presence, turned over the leaves of the book before her, and performed one of Haydn's most beautiful pieces. It was a morceau full of softness and pathos. As she concluded, she looked down at the little face turned towards her with such rapt interest. It was bathed in tears.

"What is the matter, Valentine?" asked Kate Venayne, though she instinctively surmised the cause of the little girl's emotion.

"If you please, ma'am, I don't know. I very often cry when I hear music that is nice. I hope you are not angry?"

"Angry, child? No. But I think you have had enough music for to-day. You will remember, now, to come here in the morning, at ten o'clock."

"I shall not forget, ma'am."

CHAPTER X.

POETRY AND PROSE.

A DAY or two after this, Val noticed a great bustle among the servants, who were perpetually carrying about boxes, trunks, and carpet-bags. She was now installed in Lady Kate Venayne's boudoir every day, and had her bed arranged in a little dressing-room, so she could observe that the greater part of Kate Venayne's dresses and linen were being packed up by Jessy, that lady's abigail.

"I must leave that child to you, Mrs. Stewart," said Lady Charrington to the housekeeper, as she indolently watched that portly personage packing some fragile articles. "I really cannot be troubled with her. I certainly intended to take her with me,—but I have changed my mind."

Mrs. Stewart certainly deserves special mention in this chronicle. Large and magnificent of person was Mrs. Stewart. She bore the cares of life on her broad shoulders lightly as Atlas bears the world, or as a porter carries a load with which he has no concern. In her complexion the roses had had another battle, in which the red rose had attained the mastery to such a degree that it would not compromise by uniting with the white, but insisted on having the entire field to itself. She was a bustling, kindly woman, if somewhat vulgar and pretentious.

"I should like to take charge of her," said Kate, in answer to Lady Charrington, looking up from her task of letter-writing.

"You, Kitty?"

"Yes. She is very intelligent, and I should like to have her with me."

"Very well. As you please," answered Lady Charrington, indifferently. "She will be a charming subject for the exercise of your philanthropy, though I cannot imagine how you could think her intelligent. However, she shall not remain long here, for I presume her father must be almost well by this time, and, of course, he cannot expect that I should

do more than undertake the care of her during his stay in the hospital."

So it was settled that Val was to be formally given over to the guardianship of Kate Venayne, who calmly and cheerfully undertook the responsibility, without fuss or parade. Every arrangement necessary for the child's journey was left to Kate. Lady Charrington was, though she did not choose to acknowledge it, heartily vexed with herself for having meddled at all; and why she had done so she could not now imagine. She wished the father would come to claim his daughter again, and relieve her from the sense of having acted foolishly.

"And when he does so," she mentally vowed, "I will never interfere with the affairs of low people again. I cannot conceive what absurd notion seized me. It was an unlucky day when I dreamt of undertaking philanthropic duties."

Child-like, Val was delighted with the excitement of the change. She very often asked Lady Kate when her father would probably leave the hospital, but as she was assured that it was entirely uncertain, it would have been strange if she had not enjoyed the

pleasant journey, which afforded such an inexhaustible variety. It was now September, and the weather was lovely. Lady Charrington was in unusually good spirits, and even took some notice of Val, so that the child had never passed so agreeable a week as that spent in going to Lord Charrington's seat in Scotland.

Little Val enjoyed great liberty in her new abode, which was an inexpressible relief, for she had not quitted the house at all during her stay with the family in London. Not only was she permitted to roam at will through the enormous gardens of the Castle, but sometimes Lady Kate took her to the neighbouring village. There was soon a palpable difference observable in her appearance, for in a few weeks she became plump and ruddy, with a bounding step and a joyous voice. It was very naughty of her not to pine and fret at the separation from her family; still, there was an excuse for her, that she thought she was to return to her own home in a little while, and she was only eight years old, after all.

She made acquaintance with several children, in the free-and-easy fashion indulged in

by young folks. Her greatest favourite was the niece of the housekeeper, Flora Macgregor, a child just two years her senior; and this temporary friendship was of infinite advantage to her, because, although ignorant, this little girl was much better educated than Val, and the desire of equalling, if not outstripping her, gave rise to a feeling of emulation which made her race on the path of learning.

The two children formed as strong a contrast as could be imagined. Val was lively and gay, yet the natural expression of her face was dreamy and almost melancholy. Her dark, thoughtful eyes, the soft curve of her lips, and a peculiar habit she had of standing with her hands clasped and her glance turned to the skies, gave her a spiritual look; and sometimes, when vexed, she would assume a fiery, haughty attitude, as if she were the heiress of the estate on which she was an accidental intruder. Flora, so far from being a little aristocrat, was completely plebeian in all her ideas, gestures and looks; she was perfectly common-place in all her notions, and never became absorbed in reveries like her new-found companion. She did not understand Val's brown studies at all, which is not

very surprising, as that young lady did not comprehend them well herself, and when Flora sometimes asked "What she was thinking of?" would innocently reply, "I don't know." However, the two children assimilated remarkably well, and played and learned together as if with one heart.

Val had been at the castle perhaps a fortnight, when she and her new playmate discovered a novel source of amusement, which had the additional charm of a hidden pleasure. They were roaming over some of the apartments which were not much in use, and suddenly emerged on a kind of large sitting-room. At one end of this was an old-fashioned pianoforte. They approached it, and half frightened at their own temerity, opened and touched it.

"Hush,—sh," whispered Flora, as Val, more audacious, continued to run over the keys with an uncertain yet daring hand. "If aunt should hear."

Val stopped. Then the pleasure of having an instrument all to herself proved too great a temptation.

"O, nobody can hear us," she answered. "Besides, if they do, we are doing no harm."

Let me try if I could play a tune. O, I love to hear music—don't you?

"I dinna care much aboot it," replied Flora, in a flutter of alarm lest her aunt or some one else should surprise them, and scold them for making a noise, and meddling with things they had no right to touch.

"Then go away. I like it, and I want to play. I'd ask Miss Venayne to teach me, only I'm afraid. I want to try if I could play a tune. I know such lots upon lots of songs—some pretty ones too. Papa used sometimes to play on his harp for me, and I used to hear such nice ones on the organs, also."

And Val, obstinately determined on amusing herself, picked out one of the airs of the day, slowly, note by note. Then she tried to play with both hands, but that was not so easily managed. Finding that nobody came, Flora was content to stay and listen, though she did not take much interest in the performance. Val, who seemed bewitched by the instrument, remained essaying tune after tune, until at last Flora, tired, insisted she must go and play at keeping shop.

Day after day the children returned to the deserted apartment; and as Val gained more

fluency, playing several tunes by ear, Flora was more satisfied to perform audience. Their absence on these musical expeditions was never remarked, for they were in the habit of playing several hours after their lessons were over, and no one thought of asking where they had been. Val had an incredibly quick ear, and a most retentive memory, so that she not only learnt a song at once, but always remembered it. She had an extraordinary stock of music ready at a moment's notice, and when at home she had been remarkable for almost unceasingly warbling, like an infatuated canary-bird. She had an ample opportunity just now for playing, as the Castle was full of company, and amid the hurry and bustle that reigned in the place nobody had time to bestow much notice on the little girls.

“Some time or other, when I am grown up,” said Val to Flora one day, “I mean to learn to play beautifully. And papa will teach me to play the harp.”

CHAPTER XI.

“TWIST YE, TWINE YE, EVEN SO.”

It was a happy day when Raymond was pronounced completely well. The case had not proved so serious as had at first been anticipated; and not only was his arm saved, but he had gone through the course of treatment with comparatively little suffering. Youth, so to speak, a naturally sound and healthy frame, and temperate habits, had done much towards assisting his recovery.

He was as joyous as a schoolboy on the last day of the term, and was picturing to himself the delightful meeting with his wife and little ones. He intended firstly to wait on Lord Charrington, to thank him, and to claim Val. With a light heart and a firm step he quitted the hospital, drawing vivid imaginary sketches of the approaching re-union of the family.

"Nobody would take me for the miserable being who came here some weeks ago," he thought. "I am as happy as a king."

He absolutely whistled as he walked along, as if he had been released from bondage, and glanced in at this window and at that, where gay and glittering things were displayed to view. He fancied to himself what he would first say, and what Lucy and the others would answer, arranging one of those preconcerted interviews which obstinately persist afterwards in never going in accordance with the programme. Poor fellow, he had felt so wretchedly lonely during his stay of five or six weeks in the hospital, and had so missed the dear familiar faces, and longed for the tones he loved. Of course, he had been cared for in every way, but the intense, hungry desire to have his own beloved darlings with him had robbed him of sleep many a night, and induced many feverish symptoms which puzzled the physicians. The unfortunate man had, what was an exceedingly inconvenient affair in his circumstances, an unusually affectionate and sensitive heart. He loved his wife, he adored his children and his home, and he was a good fellow, and deserved to be happy and

successful in life. However, it is not sufficient to deserve success in this world; we must command it, Sempronius, and even then it is one thing to issue orders, and another to be obeyed. And poor George Atherley was not one to lead. He was one of those who make excellent servants, but are too weak to take the mastery in the battle of life. It is a problem never to be solved, why some people, who merit nothing save a good kicking, walk up the steeps of prosperity with as much ease as a blue-bottle strolls up a pane of glass, whilst others, who work hard and strive heroically to keep in the straight path, are perpetually struggling in deep waters, tossing as aimlessly as a buoy eternally bobbing up and down, only preserved from drifting away altogether by being attached to something.

Raymond's first visit was made to Mrs. James. That good woman received him cordially, and shook him violently by the hand. Her lodgings had been let during his absence, but would be vacant in three days, as the present occupants were on the point of leaving.

"And I'm precious glad of it, I can tell you, Mr. Raymond," said the honest little widow. "For the man's a nasty, low, drunken

scamp, and hardly ever pays me, and I've been used to get my rent as regular as the day; and he uses his poor wife abominably, so brutally, the ruffian! I only wish I had a chance of scratching him, the mean, paltry villain; I'd leave some fine tokens of my opinion for him to think about, I'm blessed if I wouldn't. His wife, to be sure, is a little given to taking more than is good for her, and has no more idea of comfort and tidiness, bless you, than a costermonger's donkey has of a holiday. Lord bless you, he's a limb, and she's pretty nearly the same, always squabbling and going on. And so you're coming back, Mr. Raymond? I'm very glad, I'm sure. I've got all your things, as comfortable as possible, just ready for you to take whenever you like."

Leaving her, George directed his steps towards Drury Lane, to seek his former comrade, Farley. He turned up Drury Court, and readily found No. 6, where his friend lived. Drury Court is certainly not the most aristocratic or salubrious region in this great metropolis. It is short, narrow, and squalid, with tall houses on either side, peculiarly dingy of aspect. In this unsavoury region, children, of course, abound, clustering like flies round a

sugar-barrel, in every gradation of filth and raggedness, busily engaged in manufacturing dirt-pies in the gutter which runs down the middle of the Court, a foray being occasionally made on them by one or other of the tatterdemalion, slatternly, slipshod women who lounge in Caryatidean attitudes against the door-posts.

A ragshop, with its black dolly dangling over the door, occupied the basement story of No. 6. A large, fat, greasy female, with a prominent beak, an expensive though careless toilette, and who was laden with such a quantity of mock jewellery that she sparkled like an antiquated fish in a dark pantry, was lolling by the door, absorbed in silent contemplation of her slippers, which were striking in quantity if not in quality, formed of blue velvet embroidered with many-coloured beads. She looked up as Raymond stopped.

"Is Mr. Farley at home?" asked the harpist.

"I guess he is," answered the daughter of Israel, civilly enough, "seeing as how he's bin gruntin' and groanin' the live-long morning on that blessed cornopean of his. Do you want to see him?"

"I have come with the intention of seeing him," replied George.

"That way, then, if you please, second floor. Mind the stairs."

Groping up a dark and dangerous staircase, and guided by the resonant tones of a cornet which was in full play above, George arrived safely at the door of Farley's room. He rapped twice rather loudly, and presently the door was flung wide open by a respectable matron, the mother of the cornet-player. She was a woman of about fifty, large, stout, and puffy, with a broad, vulgar, good-humoured countenance. Wiping the suds from her red arms, she gave Raymond a hearty welcome.

"How d'ye do?" she inquired, holding out a damp hand. "So you're out again? Glad to see you—and I mean that same, I really do. Come in—come in. I suppose you're come after Tom? Luckily he's here to answer for himself. Come in."

The room was dim and close-smelling, reeking with soap-suds, and the exhalations of freshly-ironed linen. The place was neat and clean, though it was not easy to see through the haze caused by the evaporations from the

linen suspended on cords stretched across the apartment.

“Hilloa, the dickens, and it’s you, is it—nobody else?” ejaculated Tom, who had been essaying to master one of the leading airs in “Geraldine” from an extraordinary fragment of beer-stained, ragged paper, covered with hieroglyphics. “Tip us your daddie, old boy. Upon my word, I’m jolly glad to once more behold your distinguished physiog. I’m just going to have my bit of dinner, so if you’d like to join me and have a bit of grub, now’s your time, by jingo. Say the word, and don’t miss the opportunity of tasting as pretty a morsel of liver and bacon as you’d come across in a day’s walk.”

Raymond thanked him, but added that he was rather in a hurry. He inquired if Farley would again join him, or had he made new arrangements with some other person.

“Why, you see,” began the cornet-player, slightly embarrassed, “it wasn’t to be expected that I could wait for you all this time, you know, and——”

“Certainly not,” interrupted Raymond. “Make no apologies, I beg, my dear fellow.”

“Well, you see, I’ve joined another chap,

and I can't very well be off the bargain now, you know. An uncommon nice feller he is, too, by Jove, a real jolly sort of cove, quite a different style of party to yourself, you understand, and no offence meant, you know. But if you'd like to have another man, I can recommend you an uncommon nice young chap, a feller as plays the violin. Very clever he is too, by George, and no mistake. He lent me that piece of music from the new opera."

"What kind of fellow is he?" asked Raymond.

"Oh, a very good sort of chap. If you'd like to see him you could talk to him, you know, and settle it with him. If you don't take to one another afterwards, there's no harm done; you can cut him, of course, without being disagreeable, for you're not obligated to stick to one another if you don't suit, you know."

"Where could I see him?" again inquired Raymond, who was anxious to arrange with some eligible coadjutor.

"Well," said Farley, slightly disconcerted, "he's always to be heard of at the White Hart, Vinegar Yard. But it's rather hockerd just now for me to go there, as I've run up a little score there, by George, nothing to speak

of, but they're so cussed disagreeable at these places. However, never mind, I'll go, by jingo, as I don't like to see a feller in a difficulty about such a trifle, you know. I say, mother, don't put my grub on the fire till I come back. I say, come along, Raymond."

With a parting salutation to Mrs. Farley, George followed his old comrade, who, hastily putting his cornet and scrap of music into a drawer, darted downstairs.

In a few minutes they were within the White Hart, and Raymond was introduced to his proposed partner, a pale young man of dissipated appearance, with long dank hair, and a peculiarly pallid face. This individual gladly agreed to join Raymond, as the "party" with whom he had been in the habit of going about had lately died.

This affair settled, Raymond quitted Farley and his new ally, and directed his steps towards Carlton-house Terrace. Arrived at Lord Charrington's residence, he inquired, firstly, if his lordship was in town, and, being superciliously answered in the negative, secondly, if he could see Mr. Armytage. His message being carried to that functionary, and his request for an audience being

granted, Raymond was ushered into the presence of Lord Charrington's representative, who had received instructions from his master regarding the poor man.

Mr. Armytage informed Raymond that the Earl would not be in town for some time, but that he had left a five-pound note for him, as a slight assistance whilst he was settling down again. His wife and family should be sent for immediately, and taken to his home. With which information, Mr. Armytage dismissed the harpist.

Lucy and the children did arrive in three or four days, just as George was established in his old quarters. Lucy was not much pleased at being obliged to quit her pretty country lodgings for the dingy place that she hated; but of course she could not say much in the way of complaint, and as Raymond, in company with his new, and it must be acknowledged, much more honest and sober partner, acquired tolerably good earnings, she was soon in a passably agreeable humour. George had now nothing especially to desire except the return of Val, which he looked forward to with the utmost impatience, although Lucy represented the singular advantage it would be for the child if Lady Charrington kept her indefinitely.

CHAPTER XII.

LINKS.

“ARE you really serious, Kitty? I thought you were thoroughly sensible and given to matter-of-fact,” said Lord Charrington, when his sister proposed to take charge entirely of Val. “Why, I should never have suspected you of being so romantically absurd.”

“I like the child,” answered Kate Venayne, “and with the father’s consent it would be infinitely better for the girl to receive a good education, and be trained as a nursery-governess, or a waiting-maid, or anything respectable, than for her to remain with him, to learn nothing. When she is old enough to judge for herself, she can take her choice of what path she prefers. She will in any case have to earn her own livelihood, and she will have a better chance with a good education than none at all.”

“It is cruel to offer to separate parent and child,” said Lord Charrington, who was unable to understand his sister’s freak.

“I do not desire to do so unless the father and mother consent. But this child is not fit for common service, and she will have no chance for any honest life if she gets no training. It is a fine opportunity for her to learn, and learn thoroughly.”

Lord Charrington reflected. He was very unwilling to agree to the idea.

“If you do not like to propose it,” resumed his sister, “I will write to this Raymond, and offer to take his child for a time, and give her a solid training, with the view of afterwards employing her as a lady’s maid. I would infinitely prefer having a maid trained by myself; and already she can do several little things much better than Jessy, and is as obedient and docile as possible.”

Lord Charrington had nothing to advance in objection, as in reality he did not care a doit about the matter. So Kate wrote to make her proposition.

Her letter created nothing but grief and alarm in George’s heart; but Lucy impatiently urged him to accept the offer. She argued

that such a chance would never occur again, and that he would be a fool to refuse it.

“I declare you’re enough to provoke a saint,” she exclaimed; “why, what can *you* do for the child, I should like to know? She has no chance at all here, whereas, since this lady has taken a fancy to her, she may do great things, and after a time she will be getting a good situation at a high salary. I’m sure you’ve no more sense than that table there. I wish I had just such another chance for Nancy and Amy, poor girls. You are mad to put yourself against such a chance.”

The result of her arguments was, that in a few weeks George wrote gratefully to Lady Kate Venayne, accepting her offer, but begging, at the same time, that he might be allowed occasionally to see his child. Lady Kate Venayne replied that he should be permitted to visit her at stated intervals.

Then the affair was settled.

Val was not informed of this arrangement. Her repeated inquiries about her father being answered evasively, she began to ask less frequently, and apparently to take it quite as a matter of course that she was to remain in her present situation until further notice. Kate

Venayne, who by degrees had become much attached to the winning little creature, took the utmost possible pains with her, in the wish to make of her a smart clever maid. The child, who had an impressionable nature and a grateful heart, amply rewarded the goodness of her patroness. She was quick, docile, and readily learned any task set for her.

Her stolen performances on the old piano did not lose their charm for Val by constant repetition. On the contrary, every moment she could command was dedicated to the worn-out instrument. She had not, of course, the slightest idea of what she was doing, merely playing by ear such airs as she knew; but her touch was singularly brilliant for so young and inexperienced a child. She ran over the keys with a confident daring which often surprised herself, and though she never ventured on improvising more than simple tunes, yet she played in a manner which betrayed that she had an inherent genius for music.

Flora, soon growing tired of these amateur performances, after a time gave up the part of listener; but as the weather was now too bad for out-door games, and Val was always too much occupied with her new toy to be any

longer a merry companion, she was content to remain in the room, dressing her doll, or doing such needlework as her aunt gave her as a task.

One morning, having finished a writing-lesson which Lady Kate Venayne had set her, Val looked about for something else to do. She was in Kate Venayne's sitting-room, alone. Her eyes suddenly lighted on the piano, which was open, and she felt an instinctive wish to approach and try it. She went up to it, and timorously pressed the keys. The rich, dulcet tone which the instrument yielded was such a delicious contrast to the battered old piece of furniture to which she had been accustomed for a couple of months, that it sent a thrill of ecstasy through her entire frame. She ran quickly over a short air, then paused, frightened, at her own temerity; the temptation, however, was too strong, for Val, it was evident, was an artist by nature.

Quaking with fear at her audacity, yet trusting to chance that she would not be detected, the child began playing very softly, petting and caressing the instrument as if it were a real friend. Entranced by the exquisite tone, she went on, regardless of consequences,

until she was dashing helter-skelter over every tune she knew.

She had played almost her entire collection when, looking up, as if from a dream, she beheld the calm face of Lady Kate Venayne leaning over her. She sprang from the music-stool, where she had perched herself, and ran affrighted to the corner of the room, not venturing to utter a word.

The lady perceived her natural terror, and smiled kindly, if sadly.

"Come here, Val, my child," said she, seating herself. "Do not be frightened; I am not angry. Come here."

Trembling with alarm, Val timidly approached her, shaking like an aspen-leaf. She sank at the feet of Kate Venayne, and hung her head, the tears now beginning to steal down her crimsoned cheeks.

"How was it that I never knew that you could play?" asked Kate Venayne.

"Because—I hope you won't be angry—I—if you please, I—I learnt on the piano in the Green Room," faltered Val, without daring to raise her eyes.

"You learnt? Who has taught you, my dear?"

“Nobody. I learnt myself—I mean——”

“Well? You mean——?”

“Yes—I—” She was fairly sobbing now, and stammered out a history of her musical studies.

Lady Kate listened quietly till the child had finished.

“Should you like to learn properly, to be able to play from music?” she inquired at last.

Val looked up eagerly in her face, forgetting all terrors, joy and hope flashing from her eyes. In an impulse of frantic gratitude, she jumped up, flung her arms round her kind friend’s neck, and kissed her vehemently.

“Come, you must begin with the gamut, to learn the names of the notes. It is perfectly useless to play by ear, except for mere amusement. But if I teach you, Val, you must not neglect your ordinary duties. I cannot allow you more than an hour’s instruction each day, and if you progress visibly within a month, I shall continue. Do you understand what I have been saying?”

“Oh, yes. You mean that I ought to know how to play from music-books like those, instead of playing out of my own head, and that

if I don't learn something worth while in a month, you wont teach me any more."

"Exactly," said Lady Kate, smiling. "As I have an hour to spare now, I will give you your first lesson in the gamut."

Val now trembled from joy instead of fear. She followed Kate Venayne to the piano, and stood by her, waiting in silent expectation while that kind lady wrote out the gamut on a sheet of music-paper. Kate Venayne, who had been surprised at her playing so well by ear, did not anticipate that she would have patience to learn rules; as those who have once gained fluency so easily seldom can endure the drudgery of thus recommencing. She seemed to glance at the gamut, and understand it at once. Kate Venayne, finding at the end of half-an-hour that the child remembered the notes perfectly well, began teaching her the time-table. This, too, she nearly mastered in one lesson; so that at the expiration of the hour, both teacher and pupil were thoroughly satisfied at the progress made.

Every day these lessons were renewed. Val, so far from neglecting her ordinary duties, redoubled her efforts to please her benefactress, lest, by failing in some particular, the lessons

she prized so much might be withheld. Her progress was extraordinary; she almost seemed to anticipate her teacher's instructions; and at last her daily practice was extended to two hours.

By April, she played really very nicely from music. The family were then preparing to return to London. Val, who was considered to belong solely to Lady Kate Venayne, was to go with her mistress as part of the retinue.

CHAPTER XIII.

“TURN, FORTUNE, TURN THY WHEEL.”

A FORTNIGHT before the period fixed for their departure from Scotland, all the arrangements were suddenly changed. Lady Kate, who had a few days previously visited some poor cottagers on the outskirts of the village, was seized with all the symptoms of a fever, and was soon in so delirious a state that removal was not to be thought of for an instant. Muffled footsteps, and that whisper which thrills one with a sensation of unutterable horror, pale anxious faces, and the constant presence of the family physician attested that the illness was of a very serious nature. Lord Charrington, who loved his sister with an affection profound and unchangeable, was in a frenzy of grief. Geraldine, whose love was of a milder character, but who honestly felt exceedingly sorry, was

chiefly fearful lest the disorder should prove contagious. Lord Charrington was always hovering in the vicinity of Kate's room; his wife sent constantly to inquire, but she was in a highly nervous condition, and never ventured beyond her own apartments, where she was constantly confined with a headache.

Kate's little protégée, Val, was not permitted to enter the room where her beloved mistress lay—at least, she was prohibited from going there; but many times, when Jessy was occupied or out of sight, a white, haggard little visage would appear at the door leading from the boudoir, and then Val would glide in, and approach the bed. With eyes blinded by scalding tears, she would gaze on the flushed face of the patient, and long to be allowed to bathe the burning temples. Then, fearing that Jessy might surprise her, she would disappear as silently as she came.

In few days a heavy cloud hung over the house. Lady Kate Venayne had been given over. Val, who was almost delirious with grief, prayed and besought Jessy to allow her to be with her dying mistress. The waiting-maid, however, dared not disobey orders, and was obliged to refuse, though she was touched by

the child's anguish. Stupified by despair, Val crept to her own little chamber, and lay there for hours, rejecting food, and sobbing till she was nearly sick. She was at length aroused by the housekeeper, who came to tell her that the dying lady would see her. The child sprang up, and followed her with unsteady footsteps.

Kate Venayne was now calm, though pale and exhausted. Her brother sat beside her, his face buried in his hands. He did not raise his head on hearing the step of his sister's protégée, remaining like a carved statue of despair. Kate smiled sadly as the poor little girl climbed wildly on the bed. She permitted her to clasp her arms round her wasted form, and bade her farewell in a low, clear tone, giving her good advice and kind counsel for the future. Val listened, holding her breath and choking down her sobs for fear she should disturb her beloved friend; but at last overcome by her emotions, the child fainted, and was carried away by Jessy.

"Poor little creature!" said Kate, sadly; "I had laid out a plan for her future, and I intended—but God has willed it otherwise, and perhaps it is better as it is. I ought

not to have desired to separate her from her parents."

She lay back with a melancholy air, as if reflecting. Her brother raised his head, and looked at her with red, wild eyes, without uttering a word, and then hid his face again.

Having regained her senses, the dying woman desired to make a will, being aware that she had not many days to live. She left several legacies, and, among others, thirty pounds a-year to her little friend.

In four days Lady Kate Venayne was dead.

Within three weeks Lord and Lady Charrington were again in London, the child Val accompanying them.

On arriving in town, the earl wrote to Raymond, requesting him to come to the Carlton Club. On receiving the note, Val's father flew to the place of appointment.

He was shocked to see the alteration in the appearance of the kind old earl; age, which had seemed hitherto loath to deface such noble lineaments, had suddenly crushed him with an iron grip. He was haggard, and wrinkled, and appeared to walk with difficulty.

Lord Charrington spoke without preliminary on the matter which he desired to

arrange. He explained that as his sister was dead, her plan for educating and putting forward Val was of course now at an end, but that if Raymond liked he would undertake the charge which his sister had left, as everything she had contemplated must be sacred in his eyes. His voice faltered, and he was scarcely able to conclude, but he showed the harpist what an advantage it would be to give the little girl an education such as would thus be afforded to her.

George, who had succeeded in smothering down all his own personal feelings, was too unselfish to desire to deprive his child of such unprecedented advantages, and agreed, begging at the same time so earnestly for an interview with his darling that Lord Charrington could not for an instant think of denying him the gratification.

The next morning, Raymond, his heart beating wildly, approached Carlton-house Terrace. Poor fellow, it was a hard battle, and twenty times he resolved to declare that he never could part with his child. A score of fiends seemed dragging with cutting cords at his heart, which bled afresh at every tug.

Having announced his errand, he was de-

sired to walk into a little waiting-room, and in a few seconds Val was clinging round his neck, sobbing and uttering about a dozen broken sentences in a breath. Poor Raymond, though he knew that his child returned his passionate love, had not been prepared for such a storm. He tried to pacify the little thing, but it was long before he could succeed. Even when she lay quiet in his arms, it was due more to the exhaustion consequent on her excitement than to his persuasive powers that the change was to be attributed.

Val eagerly demanded if she was going home with him, and grew white as he endeavoured to impress on her mind the advisability of staying where she was. Her sobs broke out afresh, and she clung to him as tightly as if she were drowning.

"I must—I must—I *must* and *will* go home, papa," she cried, every iteration of the words going like a stab to her father's heart.

"My darling," he whispered, "if I were rich, you would go to school as a matter of course, and be away from me a great deal. I cannot afford to give you an education, and you would never again have a chance of being taught at all."

Val was deaf to everything, and kept repeating her wish to go back with him.

“Will you try school just for six months, for my sake—for the sake of poor papa, darling? Just six months. And then if you don’t like it, you shall come home.”

It was a difficult matter, but at last he prevailed with her, and it was agreed that she should make the trial. She was to see her mother and brothers and sisters once, and then part again from them for six months. It was a terribly long time to look forward to, especially for a child who had never till this time been absent from home for six days. However, as her father made such a point of it, she consented, with a heart swelling nigh to bursting.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIX YEARS.

It is extraordinary how children seem to break their hearts when leaving their homes, even under the most favourable circumstances, for school, and yet how in a week or two they form new ties, new affections, new friendships, and are soon the gayest of the gay in the midst of their playmates.

Val's experiences of school life were like those of most school-girls. At first she moped and crept away to brood over her individual miseries; then she began to allow herself to be dragged into play by little girls, and bullied and fagged by big ones. At last she grew perfectly satisfied, and then her progress was marvellous. Already, thanks to the care of Kate Venayne, she had a tolerable idea of music, and she threw herself into the study

with an ardour which never abated. The school was not a fashionable one, but it was a very respectable establishment; the teachers were good, and the two sisters to whom the house belonged were very conscientious in the discharge of their duties, albeit somewhat stiff and repellant, as is perhaps only proper with the care-takers of a nest of wild young birds.

At the end of the stipulated six months, the progress which Val had made was so marked, that it was agreed she ought to continue her course of study. At the end of a year her own family was all in confusion. Her father had been seized with fever, her mother was also ill, and her brothers and sisters were dispersed among kind neighbours. Lord Charrington sent several times to enquire about the poor man, in whom he took an interest, and sent money to help the poor people who had taken charge of the children from Christian charity.

At last Raymond and Charles recovered, but Lucy died, and the younger children were all swept off by the fatal disorder.

Suddenly all trace of the unfortunate harpist was lost. Lord Charrington instituted the

most minute enquiries after him, in vain. On quitting the hospital, he had left no intimation of where he was going. He had returned for a short time to Mrs. James's; but she knew nothing of him more than that he had stayed for about three days, and had then gone out with his son one morning, in a very desponding state, and never came back, though he had left all his things.

The Earl placed the affair in the hands of the police, being alarmed for the safety of the poor harpist. But, after a long search, nothing was elucidated—it seemed almost as if the man and his son had vanished into thin air,—and so the matter was perforce allowed to fall into oblivion. They told Val nothing about it, trusting to the chapter of accidents to supply them with excuses to answer her enquiries.

Six years flew over—mingled years of weal and woe. Val, who had, with few exceptions, remained at school all the time, was now a tall girl of sixteen, unformed, yet already promising to be “a beauty.” She was now at home—that is to say, at Carlton-house Terrace—for she had been pining so much for a change, that Lady Charrington had given permission for her to leave school for a little while, and

sojourn at home. At home! yet not at home. Had she forgotten the father whom she had so passionately loved, and all the dead ones with whom she had passed her earliest years? I cannot tell. Six years make memories so faint with children; and every time she had ventured any enquiry she had been put off with the stern command from somebody or other, not to be "troublesome."

The young girl instinctively felt that she must keep herself as much out of sight as possible. She generally remained within the boundaries of her own room, where she read and dreamt, and did nothing in particular. In fact, she was longing to return to school, for the restraint of the superb cage in which she was at present immured was most galling. Somehow she felt as if she had no right to be there at all, though why she should feel so was beyond her comprehension, for she imagined she was the daughter of some poor relation of the noble family, and that this was the reason why Lady Charrington obviously did not like her. The servants took no notice of her, the housekeeper, Mrs. Stewart, being the only individual in the establishment who appeared conscious of her existence.

Poor little Val. She admired my lady most ardently. She considered her a being of a superior order, and whenever she had an opportunity of doing so unobserved, gazed at her with a kind of timorous wonder. Lady Charrington never saw her, nor took the slightest notice of the fact of her being in the house, until one evening they met accidentally.

My lady, the Countess, arrayed in all the splendour of evening costume, had, before going out, descended to the library, to speak to her lord. He seldom went out in the evening now, although he had been in the habit of going nightly to his club. His health had never been the same since the death of his sister. He could no longer endure the least fatigue or worry. Lady Charrington was returning to her dressing-room, when she perceived, in one of the corridors, shrinking back as if startled and frightened, the form of a very young girl. She looked more closely, and remembered who it was—smiled carelessly, and stopped.

“Come here,” she said, kindly. “Do not be alarmed, child. Come out from that dark corner. I want to see if you are pretty. Why do you not obey me?”

Reddening with shame and terror, Val advanced. Her eyes were cast down, the long lashes sweeping her burning cheeks. With a kind of instinctive pride, she drew up her slender figure. Altogether she really looked a very lovely picture, and the Countess was perfectly satisfied.

“You are certainly pretty,” said she. “Come with me.”

Val followed her into her dressing-room, trembling as to what was to ensue, though the Countess had a pleasant smile on her face. The young girl glanced timidly at the elegant figure and brilliant toilette of the great lady, without the faintest sensation of envy, but with something of the same feeling with which she would have admired a fine work of art.

Lady Charrington threw herself on a couch, desiring Val to sit down on a low chair near her.

“So,” she observed, laughingly, “you are the little girl to whom I took such a fancy some years ago, and then grew tired of? Poor child. Never mind; I shall keep you about me, if you can do anything. What can you do?”

“I can sew, and read, and write——”

"You mean read aloud, and write notes?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, and what besides? A long list of accomplishments, certainly."

"I can——" She hesitated, for the inventory of her qualifications as humble companion was not extensive.

"H-m," said Lady Charrington, raising her eyebrows, and opening and shutting her fan. "I really don't see to what use you can be turned. You are so young; otherwise you might perhaps learn, and take Georgette's place, as she is leaving me to be married; but you are too young. It is a pity you are not one or two years older."

Val bent her head, as if she were very guilty in not being a more aged person. Lady Charrington laughed good-humouredly, then rose to go.

"Do not be unhappy about a defect which will be remedied but too soon. Perhaps you may yet arrive at the dignity of being 'my lady's' attendant. Remember to come to me in the morning. You look an intelligent girl, and I think something may be done with you. Good night."

The young girl took her hand and kissed

it respectfully. Then the Countess swept superbly from the room.

Val returned to the loneliness of her own chamber. Her ideas were all in a flutter, from the unexpected notice bestowed on her by my lady. She had wished—longed that the Countess would say something which might give her a clue to her real origin; but in this she was disappointed. Her recollections of her own home had become very indistinct, and disturbed by the total change of scene. Still, she remembered that she had once lived in a far different place from this palatial house, and that she had had a father and mother, and brothers and sisters, whom she loved profoundly. But she was unable to arrange her recollections consistently; her notions of her past life resembled the sketchy outlines of a drawing rubbed by the finger of time.

She leaned her head upon her crossed arms, and sank into the dreamy, half-wild and rambling reveries, so much indulged in by youth. Her thoughts raced over one another like showers of sparks. The usual course of her life had been abruptly interrupted by the event of the evening. The heart of the poor child was charmed at the prospect of being,

at some future period, permitted to wait on the beautiful lady whom she so ardently admired. Dream after dream flitted before her, until at last she shook off her wandering thoughts, and began to read, for it was only about eight o'clock. Lady Charrington had departed early, as she had promised to pick up a friend on her way to the Opera.

It was about nine o'clock when a sudden hurrying of steps, and a kind of stifled uproar in the house attracted the attention of Val. She listened. Every sound ceased as abruptly. Opening the door of her room, she leaned over the staircase; then descended to the next flight. A deadly silence had succeeded the hurrying and whispering. Val paused, when a door was hastily opened, and one of the maids came suddenly out. The young girl held up her hand to stop her.

"What—what is the matter?" she inquired, in a low voice, leaning over the staircase.

"Lord, miss! You nearly frightened the life out of me," answered the servant. "You look for all the world like a ghost or a white tombstone, I'm sure."

"What has happened?"

"Don't ask, miss. You had best stay upstairs. It will do you no good to know."

“Pray—I beg of you to tell me if anything dreadful has occurred,” urged Val.

“My goodness, miss, where’s the use of wanting to know things that can do you no earthly good to know, and only frighten you out of your wits,” replied Sarah Jane impatiently. “Goodness me, I do wish you’d go to your room, for I’ll get all the blame if you choose to go off in a fit of highstrikes, or anything of that sort. Lord sakes, where *is* the use of turning pale’ like that? Why, it’s no-think—nothink at all.”

Val leaned against the wall. She did not know what to think. Sarah Jane availed herself of the opportunity to escape downstairs. The trembling child sat down on the last stair of the flight she had descended, a vague terror rendering her powerless. She felt that *something* had occurred: what it could be, she was unable even to conjecture.

How long she sat she did not know, but at length she was roused by the rustling of a silken dress. She raised her head and perceived Lady Charrington coming up in all her smiling beauty.

“Why, child, are you mad? You look like a spectre. You will catch cold, foolish baby. How dare you sit there?”

Val rose, and went up stairs. Lady Charrington, who was in an unusually amiable humour, passed into her boudoir. Val, who was shivering with undefined fear, followed her. The Countess threw herself into the chair before her toilette-table, flinging her opera-cloak into the arms of Val.

"This wreath hurts my head," she murmured. "Try if you can loose it, child. Good heavens, how clumsy! You are tearing my hair out by the roots. Ring for Georgette."

Val obeyed. In a moment the French maid was at her mistress's side. The woman's face was exceedingly pale, and her hands shook to that extent that it was with difficulty she could perform her duties.

"This is an excellent opportunity for you to take a lesson, child," said Lady Charrington. "But really, Georgette, I think you are asleep. Why, you look perfectly white. Have you had a quarrel with the beloved object, eh?"

"Madame," stammered Georgette, "I—pardon—they—I—they told me not to—I cannot—mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"

Lady Charrington leaned on her elbow, and stared at Georgette as if she thought the

young woman must be going out of her wits. The seriousness of the abigail's countenance, however, and the evident alarm from which she was suffering, aroused a faint suspicion that there was some terrible secret to be communicated. She pushed from her forehead the hair which had been loosened by the nervous fingers of her maid, and looked sharply at the pale face of Georgette.

"What is the matter?" she demanded. She spoke in that decided tone of command habitual to one accustomed to be implicitly obeyed.

"I — madame — O, my lady — je——" Georgette fairly broke down, and hid her face in her hands.

"Tell me—tell me!" exclaimed the countess, in a loud tone.

"My lady—my lord—he——" She fell on her knees, unable to utter another syllable.

"Speak, at once, fool!" cried Lady Charrington, grasping her maid's shoulder, her cheeks blanched with undefined terror.

Georgette remained dumb.

"Good heavens, you will drive me mad." She snatched up the bell, and rang it violently.

The peal was answered by the footman, who appeared at the door. Usually so impassive,

there was a flutter of agitation in every action, as he waited for his mistress to speak.

“What is the meaning of this extraordinary conduct? What has happened? Is my lord ill? I must see him, and at once. I do not comprehend this mysterious behaviour,” exclaimed Lady Charrington, her voice trembling with agitation and anger. “Speak—is my lord ill?”

“No, my lady, my lord is not ill,” replied the man. His face betrayed the truth.

“He is DEAD!” shrieked Lady Charrington, falling back into the arms of Georgette and Val.

She was immediately carried into her bedroom, where she passed the night in a succession of fainting fits.

Lord Charrington had been found in his study, his head lying across his arm on the library-table—dead. The family physician had at once been sent for by the butler, but his assistance was of no avail. The health of the good old nobleman had been growing weaker every day since he lost his sister. He had never been able to rally, for he had been deeply attached to her.

Poor little Val was not of any use in the

chamber of the Countess; yet she felt too much frightened to go to her own room. So she covered down on a sofa in a corner, trying to escape from notice, shrinking into the shadow. Towards morning, she fell into a troubled sleep, waking up at dawn with a scared sensation, finding it difficult at first to remember what had happened. Georgette was slumbering in a large arm-chair; Lady Charrington was lying motionless, her lovely hair streaming over the pillows, against which her face seemed almost as white as the linen which covered them.

Val rose noiselessly, and with a strange singing in her ears, crept with unsteady steps towards her mistress. The eyes of Lady Charrington, fixed and staring, turned on the child; she slightly advanced one of her long slender white hands, which Val seized and kissed softly. The young girl knelt down beside the bed, and leaned her cheek on the extended hand, thus silently offering sympathy, while neither uttered a word.

The blow had stunned the new-made widow. She could not think. All her sensations were merged in a curious feeling of surprise, of incredulity. It would be absurd to pretend that she had passionately loved Lord Char-

rington, for that would not be the truth; but she had been fond of him, in a capricious, childish kind of way—had looked up to and admired him, had always feared his opinion as that of a superior being, yet trifled often with him in her right as a petted and spoilt beauty. She had never contemplated their being separated; she had always felt proud of being his wife. Even after the first flush of her bridal days she had experienced a kind of flutter of gratification on entering a ball-room or salon, leaning on his arm; while, seemingly rapt in some passing folly of the hour, she would turn aside to watch him, surrounded by men of science and talent, who deferred to his judgment and respected his dictum.

Of the past she was now unable to think. Past feelings, past pride lay smothered under a gloomy mist, like a bright and joyous river frozen by the winter blast.

Amid the hurry, the confusion, and the thousand necessary things which had to be done, consequent on this melancholy event, Val was completely forgotten. Her term of holidays expired at last, however, and then Mrs. Stewart packed her off again to school.

CHAPTER XV.

SUDDEN CHANGE.

MISS RAYMOND had carried off several prizes at school, chiefly for singing and pianoforte playing. There were good masters engaged at the establishment, and Val, whose love for music amounted to a passion, had taken advantage of the opportunities she thus enjoyed. The teachers, pleased with her readiness and desire to learn, gave her, perhaps, more attention than they bestowed on any of the other pupils, and her progress had been astonishing. The German music-master, Herr Ludwig Schmidt, had taken an unusual fancy to the persevering little girl, and spared no trouble with her.

Her voice amply repaid her instructors for their care. Full, rich, mellow, it far surpassed that of any of her fellow pupils, and

was a source of much pride and gratification to the two ladies who were at the head of the establishment. Val was the "show" pupil in consequence. Whenever any visitors arrived, she was called for, to play and to sing. Of this her companions were not jealous, having become accustomed to it, and being conscious that they had not taken half the pains that she did. It was a matter of surprise to them, however, that she did not appear to labour for the sake of the prizes, but for some singular love of the art—a love which they found it utterly impossible to comprehend, as they valued music simply as a showy accomplishment, and a means of becoming leading personages in the school, and being petted and praised when they went home for the holidays.

Val was now eighteen. She had not seen Lady Charrington for two years. My lady, her first tide of grief having subsided, had gone to stay with her mother, who had lived at Florence since Geraldine's marriage.

At eighteen, Miss Raymond, as she was now called, was not merely pretty: she was beautiful. Tall, elegant, and graceful, she was lively and gay in her manner, with a cer-

tain dash of the school-girl, naturally, but yet something of finish.

Val of course belonged to that unlucky class of pupils who always spend their holidays at school. This rendered her at first rather disconsolate, when her companions would depart full of glee and joyous anticipation. But she gradually became accustomed to remaining, and did not care so much now. Once a friend had invited her to stay at her home during the holidays; and this change had been enjoyed exceedingly by the poor child.

Her eighteenth birth-day had passed, and a week after, school was to break up for the holidays. Val was sitting in a somewhat melancholy mood in the drawing-room, where she had taken refuge from the bustle of packing and chattering, and scolding and flurrying. Her eyes—the long lashes of which, if not wet, were heavy with sadness—were bent over the tambour frame. It was with difficulty that she concentrated her attention, counting and working only to unpick again.

“One, two, three, four—dark blue—and then——” She sighed heavily. “Ah, this is to be done in white beads.” Another sigh.

“How happy girls must feel who have a home. O, how I wish—I would give all I have—all I have to be able to recall with clearness the home where I used to be in my childhood. It seems like a dream, now. I remember I used to call that dear, kind man papa—or do I fancy it? I remember I had brothers, and sisters, too. They must have been my brothers and sisters. I recollect Charley perfectly well. Another mistake—green for purple. What a nuisance. My ideas go wandering away. It is wrong to be discontented. Am I discontented?”

A question which she did not answer, probably because she could not, but simply went on with her work, or rather trying to repair her mistakes.

“How people’s fates and destinies differ,” was her next philosophical reflection. “I wonder what will be mine. I don’t care much.” The pretty head drooped on one of the projecting knobs of the frame, and a few large tears trickled down on the little white hand, wetting some of her wool. She felt very dreary and lonely, and the future—that curtain which the young so ardently desire to tear away, as if it would do them any good to penetrate to

the cold, forbidding stage behind it—her future seemed enveloped in the darkness of a November night. The yearning for independence, the longing to have her place fixed in the world, rose in her heart, and she was almost on the point of yielding to a passionate fit of crying, when by a violent effort of will she dragged her attention back to her work.

As she was half meditating, half trying to drive away thought, one of the maids opened the door.

“If you please, you are wanted by a lady in the parlour, miss.”

Val sprang to her feet. Of course it was Lady Charrington, for no other lady could come to inquire for her. With a step like that of a fawn she darted down and flew into the parlour.

Lady Charrington, lying back on a couch, was indolently trying to cultivate the friendship of a beautiful German canary bird, which was listening attentively to her chirps and proffered kisses, but did not seem particularly inclined to add the Countess to his list of acquaintances. She glanced towards the door as Val appeared, and smiled languidly, but kindly.

Lady Charrington was not in the least changed. If possible she was lovelier than ever, or perhaps she took more pains than ever with her toilette, and those little mysterious etceteras in which some women are such adepts. There was a sort of irresistible fascination about her, which attracted you sometimes, in spite of your better judgment, and made you ready to go to the ends of the earth to do her will and pleasure, however unreasonable, as one might for Titania, or any other fairy queen. She was elegantly dressed, in the height of the fashion, though not glaringly so; and on her lap lay curled up an infinitesimal ball of tangled silk, which, on closer inspection, proved to be a minute Skye-terrier—a little darling, with a broad blue ribbon around its neck.

Val advanced timidly, yet with her beating heart filled with joy. She was really glad to see Lady Charrington, even independently of the pleasure of receiving a visit at this particular time. She waited a moment for some encouragement to address my lady, who smilingly held out her hand, which the young girl seized, pressing her lips to the delicate fingers.

“Well, my child, I have come at last to pay you a visit,” said the Countess, pulling the

silky ears of her lazy little pet, and making a sign of permission for Val to sit beside her. "However, there is no necessity for you to waste so many pretty blushes, for I did not put myself to much inconvenience to come. Going to London, I was obliged to pass this way, and took a fancy to call and ascertain how you were progressing. I hope you have made good use of the time and opportunities which you have enjoyed here?"

"I hope so, too, madam," said Val, modestly.

"You appear to me to be much too fine now for what I originally destined you—a lady's maid."

Val's face flushed with indignation, and she moved hastily to the extreme edge of the sofa. All her ambitious fancies, and the rose-coloured dreams of girlhood seemed dashed to the ground, dissipated by the cold blast of the first breath of winter.

A lady's maid!—the idea! An indescribable sense of anger and rebellion filled her heart.

Lady Charrington saw her anger, and smiled carelessly.

"I say you are too lady-like, and I suppose your education is too finished to permit of your taking the place of a lady's maid, so I presume

we must give you something better. But, my child, I originally intended that—in fact, such a place would have been most desirable for you as—” She paused.

Val held her breath, as she thought the Countess was about to say something of the early life which she had been so long striving to recal. Lady Charrington, however, suddenly changed the subject.

“I believe your holidays are about to commence, Valentine?”

The girl drooped her head, not liking to say that she never had any holidays, lest Lady Charrington should think she was complaining.

“You shall come and stay with me. It will be a change for you. You have grown very tall. How old are you?”

“I am eighteen, madam.”

“Ah, I suppose so. Can you come with me now?”

“Now, madam!” repeated Val, bewildered. “I have nothing ready. I would have to pack all my things, which would take some time. I don’t—I—” She stammered, between anxiety and the fear of offending.

Lady Charrington shrugged her shoulders with the faintest expression of annoyance.

“Well, well, you can be sent after me, my dear. To-morrow I shall expect you. I shall speak to Mrs. —, I forget her name—your schoolmistress, about it. It will make a pleasant change for you. Really, you must have been very dull here, when your companions have been away. You look quite cheerful already, my dear.”

She rose to depart, and held out her hand with a kind smile to Val. The poor child, with a sudden impulse of gratitude and love, caught the proffered hand, and covered it with passionate kisses. Lady Charrington was for a moment disconcerted, then she laughed.

“Why, what a queer creature you are. I am afraid I do not deserve such tokens of affection. Good-bye, mignonne.”

She stooped and kissed Val, who was half kneeling, when, to her dismay, the young girl broke abruptly into a violent fit of weeping, and trembled so much that she could not stand, but was compelled to sink into a chair near the door. Lady Charrington recoiled. She could not imagine what had occasioned this unexpected scene.

“What is the matter, Valentine? Have I wounded your feelings in any way? Oh, this

is most vexatious, intolerable. Control yourself, my dear girl. I wish to heaven I had not come. My dear child, I cannot have you near me if you are subject to—— Come, come, don't cry, you distress me."

She partly soothed, partly scolded Val; but it was not until she advanced to ring the bell to summon assistance that Val could succeed in conquering her outburst of emotion, and pressing her hands together, said humbly—

"I couldn't help it—indeed I could not. I was thinking of a great many things—disagreeable things—and I tried not to—to—and then you spoke so kindly."

"Poor child—poor child—the reaction. Come, you are better now."

Val bent down her head, and answered faintly, "Yes."

"You frightened me terribly. I detest a scene! Are you ordinarily cheerful?—for if you are inclined to low spirits or hysteria, I really cannot have you about me. There, never mind. You can come to-morrow, and I shall see what you are like. Good-bye."

And, glad to escape, Lady Charrington hastened out of the room.

The next day she received Val with a cer-

tain degree of kindness. She ascertained how far the young girl had advanced in her education, and expressed herself very well satisfied. Val's musical abilities, especially the fluency which she had gained on the pianoforte, particularly pleased her.

"Why, child, you will be able to demand what terms you choose with such musical talent as you possess. I did not imagine you were endowed with such brilliant musical gifts. I must not stop short and act meanly by you. I will send you to a very fashionable boarding-school, to afford you the opportunity of being properly finished, and to give you a little more style, in which you are sadly deficient. Oh, don't thank me. It is nothing."

The holidays passed agreeably enough for Val. The Countess did not get tired of her, probably because Val was now more capable of amusing her than she had been when only a child. And although Lady Charrington seemed always so happy and joyous, there were moments when she could almost fling herself out of the window from a miserable sense of *ennui*.

Twenty times Val was on the point of entreating the Countess to tell her something of her real origin. Then some instinct would

restrain her—not precisely fear, but a kind of indescribable feeling of embarrassment, something which she was unable to explain even to herself. She tried to shake off this sensation, and to boldly approach the subject next her heart—vainly, for whenever she was about to utter the form of words she had prearranged for the occasion, a great lump would seem to rise in her throat and choke back the long pondered question. This diffidence may appear very improbable, but how many people leave the most necessary things undone or unsaid, from some undefined feeling, when other people ridicule their folly, and declare that *they* would not have acted so. And even in her kindest moods, there was a careless hauteur in Lady Charrington's manner which awed poor Val.

CHAPTER XVI.

ROSE ATHERLEY.

THE Countess adhered to her idea of giving her protégée every advantage, and sent her for the next term to one of the most fashionable establishments in London.

Val, who was accustomed to school life, speedily found friends here. Being under the protection of the Countess of Charrington, and liberally paid for, she was of course esteemed an acquisition, though there were many young ladies of rank and fortune at the establishment.

One morning, about a fortnight subsequent to Val's arrival, there was a great bustle, a ferment indeed, among the girls. One of their number had just returned after a temporary absence, caused by the illness of her mother. She was evidently a popular favour-

ite, for she was greeted with a subdued uproar of welcome.

She was a tall, fine girl of eighteen, with large brown eyes, dark wavy hair, and a brilliant complexion. The only defects in her appearance were her remarkable stoutness, and a peculiar audacity of demeanour. She almost swaggered when walking, though she was by no means ungraceful, and spoke with the assured manner of a woman of thirty.

The ovation offered by the girls she received with a nonchalant air of good nature, as if she were perfectly accustomed to be petted and caressed.

This girl soon observed Val, and her enquiries, addressed to certain favoured confidants, being satisfied, she came up to the new comer, when they were in the exercise ground.

“So, you’re the new girl?” she said, in a cavalier tone. “I want to know what you’re like.”

Val, nettled by her cool air of condescension, did not answer.

“Come, don’t be sulky,” continued her would-be interlocutor. “I don’t want to offend you. I rather like you.”

Val stared at her, without speaking, in such a puzzled way, that the school favourite laughed.

"You think I'm odd," she said, still laughing—she had a very pretty ringing laugh. "I pique myself on being odd, and saying just what I think. It's the best way, and I hate nonsense. What is your name? Mine is Rose Atherley. I am the daughter of Guy Atherley, the musical composer; I am just eighteen, my speciality is being good-natured, clever, and eccentric—and there, you know all about me. Come, tell me who and what you are. Don't be disagreeable."

"I don't choose to be catechised," replied Val, indignantly.

"I like you, as I told you before, and I'll catechise you if I please. Why, I tyrannise over everybody, and you needn't hope to be an exception to my general rule. Your name is Raymond?"

"Yes," answered Val, unable to resist the imperious air and tone of Miss Atherley.

"You are related to Lady Charrington?"

"Yes."

"Have you any money?"

"Money?" repeated Val, surprised.

"I mean, silly, are you an heiress? You are as green as this ribbon. Are you an heiress?"

"I don't know."

"O, you are not, then! for if you were, you'd know it in double-quick time. I haven't a farthing, though papa makes such lots upon lots of money, and I'm to make my living by singing. Well, what else do I want to know? Are you clever?"

"I cannot tell."

"You seem rather a muff, my dear young friend. How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Just my age. What is your father?"

"He is dead," said Val, in a low tone, feeling assured of what she said.

"Ah! what was he, then?"

"I don't know."

"That is rather a *green* thing to say. But if he was related to Lady Charrington, he must have been something respectable. Have you any brothers and sisters? I have a sister—her name is Floretta. She is a concert singer. Have you any sisters?"

Val shrank back, and from her look Rose saw that some bitter feelings had been touched

on, though she misinterpreted the expression of Val's face, and took it for granted that her new friend had lost some brother or sister. So she stopped for the time, only to renew her questioning with greater vigour on the first opportunity.

Why Miss Rose should have taken such a fancy to Val Raymond was more than even she herself could have explained. There were many girls in the school who were apparently more suited to her in point of disposition, manner, and ideas ; but she selected Val as her particular friend and confidant, and indulged her with not unfrequent reminiscences of different adventures and experiences. Val, however, was not bound to listen : Miss Rose not insisting much on this point, so long as she did not absolutely refuse to let her talk. Val was not always amused by her stories, but sometimes she could not help laughing at the careless audacity with which she would relate the most outrageous things.

“I shall be pretty well pleased when my school-days are over, I can tell you. I hate all these stupid books and eternal poring over this and that. I don't mind the music and

dancing, but then that is another affair. I haven't been very long at this place. I was in the country before I came here—at Miss Page's Establishment for Young Ladies. Before that I was in Italy, with my aunt. We used to have some jolly good fun at Miss Page's, I can assure you. They were awfully strict there, but we always made it a point to laugh at their rules when we could. I wonder how that poor old woman was able to stand us at all. O, we used sometimes to put her into such a rage—such a perfect fume."

She stopped, and laughed.

"I recollect one night—it was almost pitch dark, and very cold—half a dozen of us stole out about eight o'clock. It was hard to elude the vigilance of our ancient Cerberus, but we managed it. I should tell you that near us resided, on either side of a narrow street, two old maids, towards whom we entertained a particular spite: why, I don't know, but so it was. We provided ourselves with a very long cord, and carefully tied an end to the knocker of the door of each elderly lady." She interrupted herself again, to laugh heartily, as if the recollection afforded her infinite amusement.

“Well?” inquired Val.

“Then we knocked at the door of Miss Ayton’s house—a loud single knock—and hid. Presently the elderly lady opened the door—and such a figure as she was, with a tall white cap on, and her hair done up in curl papers. We used to think she wore a wig, till then. She peered out, shading the candle with her hand—so,—and looked first this way, and then that, but of course nobody was to be seen. Then she thought, I suppose, that she must have been mistaken, and she shut the door. As she opened and shut the door, the cord dragged up the knocker of Miss Mercer’s door, and swung it down with a bang which had the effect of a knock. Presently it was Miss M.’s turn. She appeared, with her head done up in an almost precisely similar manner to Miss A.—and candle, peering look, and all complete. She looked about, saw nothing, shut the door. The process was repeated. Miss Ayton reappeared, looked about, and exit again. Miss Mercer ditto; and the scene was as good—better than a play.”

“And then?” again inquired Val.

“At last they waited, thinking to surprise the runaway knocker; and it was rare fun to

see how they each tugged at their door, trying to open ; but, as they were pretty equal in point of strength, and the cord was holding the doors, it was some little time before they could open. At last Miss A., who was a little more muscular, perhaps, or a little more savage than Miss M.—Miss A. dragged open her door, saw the cord, and—she was in such a rage. She shrieked to her servant, who had come to the door with her the last two or three times, to fetch a carving knife, with which she cut the cord ; and then Miss Mercer flung open her door.”

“And what was the end of it ?”

Rose Atherley could hardly answer for laughing.

“O, they began to scream, and scold at each other, each thinking the other had been playing a trick—two such staid old ladies, too. Then they shrieked for the police. We could not stay to see the end of it, for fear our absence should be discovered, and had to run home as quick as we could ; and I was afraid, too, that one of our girls would betray us, she would keep on laughing so.”

“It was very wrong to act so,” remarked Val.

“Of course it was, Miss Pretty Propriety—who denies it? Therein lay the fun. I remember another night—a long while after that—it was summer. About a dozen of the elder girls settled that they would have a mad lark. What do you think they did?”

“How can I tell?” answered Val.

“About eleven o’clock, when all was very quiet, we got up, put on our white night-dresses over our frocks, and covered our heads with white veils, and put on the light-coloured boots we sometimes wore. Then we slipped down stairs, as quiet as mice, and got out, nobody the wiser. There was a very long garden wall running along by the side of the school, then a wide open space bordering on a meadow, then, at a short distance, beyond the school, and some way past that, a barrack. It was a delightful moonlight night, and we flitted along like so many ghosts. Some of the girls felt a little frightened when we got out, and wanted to return, but the rest laughed at them, and made them go on.”

“What did you go out for?” asked Val.

“Goodness only knows—fun—folly—I don’t know what. We went along, one after the other, never meeting a soul, luckily—for

it was a madcap, meaningless expedition, thought of in bravado—until we crossed the meadow, and got in sight of the barrack. We saw a sentry, pacing to and fro, as silent and grim as possible. We would not stop, but walked on as quick as we could.”

“And what did the soldier say?”

“That was about the best part of it—he was an Irish gentleman, I suppose, fresh from his native ‘Green Isle,’ for he took us for angels, all dressed in white, and fell on his knees, never offering to challenge us, and began saying his prayers, poor man, as hard as he could, with his head bent down. We ran when past him—keeping up our dignity till then—and got round by the other side of the barrack, and we were completely out of breath when we reached the side gate of Claremont House. We found the house door ajar, just as we had left it, and we were congratulating ourselves on having got home so quiet and comfortable, when, to our horror, the severe form and face of Miss Page, with a background of grim teachers, was revealed to us. I thought I should have fainted, only I am not by habit or natural tendency nervous. O, there was a row—we did catch

it! we didn't hear the end of our escapade for months. I think if she could have found out the ringleaders, she would have instantly, then and there, expelled them. But she was obliged to keep the affair quiet, because, you know, to tell about it would have been to ruin herself."

"I wonder you were not ashamed of yourselves," observed Val, severely.

"We weren't, then, I can assure you. We wrote a long string of verses about it, and used to recite them when in our bed-room. They were exceedingly good—I can't remember them all now, but they began something like this—

'Twas on a lovely summer's night,
When, all arrayed in spotless white,
As still and soft as any mouse,
Some gay young belles of Claremont House—'

Oh, bother it, I can't remember all the lines now, but they were really very clever, and there was something rich about Page and 'rage,' and 'sage,'—I forget exactly what it was now. One girl wrote a line, then the next added a rhyme, and so on. We did give it to the teachers, in the verses, I can assure

you; and you may depend on it we didn't spare Miss P. We tried a little bit of revenge on her for finding out about our lark, some time after. The old lady had some few friends to tea—two or three old young ladies, like herself, and a couple of elderly gentlemen. So we blacked our faces, and dressed ourselves fantastically, in the most ridiculous style, about ten o'clock, when the house was as silent as the grave, then stole down to the parlour door, opened it, marched solemnly round the table, where they were seated—I do believe they were playing cards—and were at the door again before they could recover their astonishment. Then we paused, and, inflating our lungs, uttered such a wild Indian screech that the house rang again; we ran out and locked the door, so that they could not get after us, flew up stairs, washed our faces, undressed, tumbled into bed, and were fast asleep—as fast as a gaol-door—when she came up, breathless, purple, to our room.”

Val stared at her new friend in horror, whereat Rose laughed.

“That finished it. She took it into her precious old noddle that I was the ringleader, and

would not let me stay any longer. She wrote to pa, and I had to leave."

"And were you the ringleader?" inquired Val, innocently.

"That would be tellings, Miss Raymond. You don't expect me to go down on my knees and confess, do you? If you do, you may. Catch a weasel asleep. I was sorry to come away, though, for I had to give up several old flirts that I liked. There was one especially—his name was Arthur Donaldson; he was about eighteen, and was at the school I told you of, near the barrack. All the others in his school had a spite against him, because he was such a nice, handsome fellow; they were jealous of him, and they used to try their best to prejudice the girls against him, telling all sorts of things to his discredit. 'Don't talk to that chap,' they would say, 'he is a shabby, extravagant fellow, not worth looking at.' His father was immensely rich, but I suppose if ever Master Arthur comes into possession of his wealth—as it is to be presumed he will in the natural course of events—he will make the money fly, and no mistake. The other boys used to be wild because Arthur was favoured with such attention, though they

hardly denied that he was a good-looking fellow. They gave him the nickname of 'Old Boots,' to throw ridicule on him."

Val did not ask the meaning of this singular appellation, but Rose pretended to take for granted that she wanted to know.

"Why," she pursued, "he used to waste his pocket-money so shamefully, that at last his father declared he'd not give him more than a certain amount, and that if he chose to fling that away before the next instalment became due, he might shift for himself as best he could. Arthur, depending on his influence with the old man, and trusting to get a fresh supply at all events through his mother, who was very fond of him, disregarded the gov'nor's threat, and went on just as before. When his money was gone, Par was inexorable, and our friend found himself without a farthing. Now, it happened that at this time Arthur was in want of a pair of new boots, and easily persuaded a friend to lend him a sovereign, for he had always paid all his debts honestly when he received his allowance. He did not like the boots when they were brought home—wouldn't wear them, in fact, being such a conceited puppy, and so vain of his ridiculous little

hands and feet. What must he do but hunt up the friend—Charley Marchmont—who had lent him the money, and coolly ask him to take the boots, as their sizes agreed, and he had not worn them even once. Charley hummed and hawed, at last offered him eighteen-pence for them, and wouldn't give more, for, he said, everybody would know that he was buying second-hand boots. To make a long story short, Charley had a new pair of boots, his sovereign, and a good laugh against Arthur. I liked Arthur, though.”*

“You are a queer girl,” was Val's comment.

“I know it. I like being queer. I like being different from other people. I mean to set up for an oddity some time or other.”

“What did your father think of your being—being——”

“Don't mince your words. Turned out of Miss Page's Establishment? Of course he believed his precious daughter's version of the story. But he didn't choose to make any disturbance in her defence. I simply left, and

* It is but justice to Miss Rose Atherley to say that her anecdotes are all strictly founded on fact, and not inventions of her own.

came here—that was all. Papa swears by his youngest. Though, poor man, he has had enough bother with her from the time she was that high. My earliest recollection of my childish days was having a dreadful row with papa. You are tired of my reminiscences, however. So I shall reserve this story.”

Val found that her new friend was a singular mixture of qualities—good, bad, and indifferent—full of contradictions—one of those persons whose character it would be impossible to define or sketch clearly. She was full of whims and vagaries; cynical, yet good-natured; good-humoured, yet full of a species of bitter philosophy. Sometimes she was free and open, sometimes she was stingy to meanness, just as the humour seized her. Sometimes she would tell the truth with a careless audacity, even when it brought down vengeance on herself; the very next day, perhaps, she would utter a falsehood with the most unblushing face. One morning Val had an example of Rose’s want of regard for truth.

One of the teachers—Miss Estcourt—had asked Miss Raymond to fetch an embroidery pattern which was in an atlas on a table in her room. Val ran up stairs, and having discovered

it, was drawing it from the book, when her sleeve brushed against a large and valuable vase, of peculiarly rare beauty, which stood on the table, and before she could rescue it, the fragile piece of china toppled over and fell with a crash to the ground.

Miss Estcourt prized this vase highly, and would not permit any one to touch it, even for the purpose of dusting it, and seldom even filled it with flowers, so fearful was she of its being injured. She was a prim old maid, but greatly beloved and respected in the school; not one of the pupils would have voluntarily done anything to annoy or distress her. Poor Val's grief and alarm, consequently, on beholding the mischief she had committed, was indescribable. She uttered a cry of terror.

"O, what shall I do!" she cried, aloud, clasping her hands. "What shall I do!"

"What is the matter? Ah, what a pity?" said a voice at the door. Val turned, and saw Rose, who had been passing through the corridor. "How did it happen?"

"I don't know—O, I *am* so sorry—my sleeve caught, I think—oh, what will Miss Estcourt say! What shall I do? O, I am so, *so* sorry." She stooped down, and began pick-

ing up the pieces, crying with mingled grief and vexation.

“What a fuss she will make!” said Rose, advancing into the room. “I’m glad it’s you and not I, who have to bear the brunt.”

Val leaned her head against the edge of the table, and contemplated the wreck.

“I’ll tell you what to do to get out of the scrape,” added Rose.

“What—how?” asked Val, looking up.

“But you are such a terrible one for telling the truth. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—that is your motto. However, as this is a particular case, you may make an exception. Here is Sylvia—our worthy chief’s lap-dog—who has followed you. *She* won’t be scolded or blamed, no matter what she does,—happy creature. Say she jumped from your arms, and threw down the vase. It’s naughty advice, my dear, which I give you, but one can’t help colouring up the truth now and then, on occasion. One can’t get through the world without it, believe me.”

“I never told a LIE in my life,” coldly answered Val, rising to her feet, with a disdainful air, “and I’m not going to begin now.”

“Just as you please. You are a fool, that’s all. It isn’t such a horrible thing to show an affair in as advantageous a manner as one can—to—it is sometimes advisable——”

“Falsehood can never be advisable,” interrupted Val, contemptuously.

“You talk with the air of a patriarch and a philosopher of seventy,” exclaimed Rose, laughing. “It seems so silly to run into a dilemma when you could so easily avoid it. Why, it isn’t as if you injured any one by throwing the blame on innocent shoulders. What difference can it possibly make to Sylvia? It’s only a white lie. I can’t see any harm. It is perfectly excusable.”

“I will not listen to you. I must not listen to you,” said Val.

She quitted the room, leaving the wreck and the embroidery pattern on the carpet, and went direct to the apartment where Miss Estcourt was sitting with two or three pupils. As she touched the handle of the door her heart beat so fast that she was obliged to pause. Then, reproaching herself for cowardice, she entered the room, walked straight up to the teacher, past the pupils, and said, simply, almost brusquely, though with a humble attitude, full of contrition—

“Miss Estcourt, I have broken your china vase.”

Miss Estcourt turned deathly pale, and was silent for a moment. Then she pressed her hand against her side, as if in pain, and looked up at Val. At last she said, with a trembling voice—

“Tell me, how did it occur?”

Val explained in a few words how the accident had happened, and then, resting her head on the back of her teacher's chair, broke into a wild fit of crying, disregarding the presence of the other girls, who looked on, half in amazement, half in admiration of Val's courage, at this scene.

Miss Estcourt did not utter a word. She pressed her hands over her face, and remained perfectly still for several minutes. At length she rose, and, without speaking, left the room.

Val felt very much frightened. She had not anticipated that Miss Estcourt would receive the news of the unfortunate accident in this manner. For a little while she continued to cry, and then, feeling that the eyes of the girls were fixed wonderingly on her, she also quitted the room with nervous, agitated steps. She stole to the garden, and sat down;

but at last resolving to go to Miss Estcourt, she crept upstairs with the guilty look of a criminal, till she reached the door of the teacher's room. She tapped so softly that she made no sound, and after waiting some time, shivering with fear, tapped again, a little louder.

"Come in," said Miss Estcourt.

Val entered, and found Miss Estcourt sitting at the little table on which had formerly stood the beautiful vase. The broken pieces of china were collected in a heap, and she was gazing on them with eyes heavy from unshed tears, her head resting on her thin hand, and her whole attitude expressive of the deepest regret. Miss Estcourt was not by any means a sentimental or even an interesting personage under ordinary circumstances. She was cold, somewhat severe, a strict disciplinarian, and her style of dress—antiquated, tasteless, grimly unattractive—rendered her the object of the secret sneers of many of the more fashionable young ladies of the establishment. Yet she had contrived to win the regard of most of the pupils by her undoubtedly excellent qualities. Val, who had so few friends, had become much attached to her, and felt the utmost contrition

for what had happened. She now stood just within the doorway, trembling. She knew that the poor lady greatly valued her vase, but she had not known that she prized it so highly.

As the delinquent paused, irresolute whether to advance or retreat, Miss Estcourt turned and looked at her not unkindly.

"My poor child," she said, "I cannot say that it was not your fault that this—this vase was broken—and that I would prefer you had destroyed everything that belongs to me rather than that one piece of fragile ware—but I can say that I forgive you," holding out her hand as she spoke.

Val seized the extended hand, and kissed it tearfully.

"I valued it as the gift of—of—a very dear friend," continued Miss Estcourt, speaking with evident difficulty. "He—I—we were to be married, but he—we were poor, though his father was rich, and he went to Australia to seek his fortune, and—and he died there." Her voice quivered so much that she was compelled to pause.

Val could not find words to make any response. She leaned against the chair in which

Miss Estcourt was seated. Her sorrow at the loss she had caused the poor lady was almost forgotten in the astonishment she felt at this glimpse of a touch of romance in the life of that thin, austere governess.

“This was his gift, and I have nothing else of his—nothing else.”

The tears which had been threatening to flow broke forth at these words, and she bent over the table, pressing her hands tightly over her face. Her slender frame shook with the violence of her emotion as she wept passionately.

Val was terrified, for she had never seen Miss Estcourt moved by any special emotion before—above all, had never seen her weep. She felt too guilty to dare to offer her any comfort, and too much frightened to utter a word or make a sign. At length Miss Estcourt raised her head, and wiped off her tears.

“Leave me, Valentine. We must go downstairs. I am not angry with you. I forgive you. I trust to your honour not to repeat anything I have told you.”

Val glided from the room, and went down to her music-lesson. As she was crossing the hall she met Rose Atherley.

"Well?" demanded Rose, stopping her.
"You have told? What did she say?"

"She has forgiven me," answered Val, simply, "and I am so sorry."

"For being forgiven? That is original."

"No, no—for breaking the vase. Oh, I am so sorry."

"You were a silly to admit it was your fault. I can't help laughing at you. I should not have been so verdant. But you are a being of a superior order, above all petty subterfuges and cowardly white lies. You wouldn't tell a little tiny white lie to save your sister from being hanged—or yourself either, I'll do ye the justice to say. I should so like to see you dressed as a martyr; I think you would look perfectly charming, with your back hair let down, and that heroic expression on your countenance which it wore just now." And she walked off, humming the closing bars of a song from the "Sicilian Bride."

About a week after this, Val and Rose were crossing the hall, when they for the first time noticed the boy who sometimes came to do odd jobs in the garden. He was perhaps fourteen, but small and thin, and looked so intensely melancholy, as he waited alone,

leaning against the trellis-work of the porch, that Val could not resist stopping to speak to him. Rose stopped also, and asked why he appeared so miserable—what was the matter with him?

“Nothing, miss,” replied the boy, looking up, not a little surprised at the interest displayed. “Leastways, nothin’ that you could do anything for.”

“How do you know we could do nothing for you?” said Rose, impatiently.

“Because—because, I *know* you couldn’t.”

“You should allow me to be the best judge of my capability to serve you.”

“What, miss?”—not quite understanding what she meant.

“I might help you if I knew what was the matter.”

“Well, miss, I know you couldn’t. The fact is, my sister’s husband is a painter—his name’s Tom Walker—and some weeks ago he was painting a house, and he was standing on two long ladders tied together, as you’ve seen them, miss, I’ve no doubt, and the rope they was tied with broke, you see, miss, and he tumbled down, and was so hurt he has been nearly killed, and he has three children, and

my sister helps my mother in the laundry, but she isn't very well, and mother has me and six children to keep, and herself as well, and business hasn't been very good for some time, as some of the ladies she washes for has gone away, and we don't know what to do for my sister and her husband, miss—and there you know all about it. He used to make good earnings, and now they've been obligated to pawn nearly everything they have, after Tom left the hospital. And you know, miss, mother can't help them, being so poor as she is, and having so many to keep, and she being a widow, too, which makes it very hard for her, you understand. She cries so bad sometimes about Tom and Betsy, that you'd be sorry for her. And the poor little uns—it's hard lines for them—perhaps with the workhouse before them."

He brushed his sleeve across his eyes as he spoke, and then sighed bitterly. His tone and his sad aspect, more even than the melancholy story he related, touched the hearts of his listeners. They did not answer, and the boy added, with a short, dry laugh, as if apologising for having troubled them with the history of his sister's misfortunes—

“So you see, what could young ladies like you do for us? Though, I’m sure I ought to be very much obliged to you for being at the trouble of listening to me, and for caring for the likes of me. It seems to lighten one’s heart, somehow, to talk about it.”

At this moment the gardener came up, and ordered him to weed at the end of the garden. The boy touched his cap respectfully to the young ladies, and went away.

“He’s been telling you about his brother, I expect, young ladies?” observed the old gardener, a privileged gossip.

“Yes—it is a melancholy story,” observed Rose.

“And such a good young couple as they were—so industrious and happy. I know them very well, and I know every one respects and likes them. It’s a thousand pities, young misses, I’m sure—and for such a comfortable home to get broke up like that. You should see how patient and good she is, even when he gets despairing like, when he gets talking about his bein’ so helpless, and the children, and all that. It makes one feel mad sometimes, to think how poor one is. But ’tain’t no good thinking about it at all.”

"No use thinking about it?" repeated Rose, as the old man went away. "Pooh!"

She reflected a moment.

"Just imagine now," she resumed, "there are some fifty girls here, and they are all more or less provided with pocket-money, and they don't want for good-nature, I'll do them the justice to say. Suppose they would agree each to give sixpence a week—the little ones might give threepence—till this man gets well; wouldn't that keep the family pretty well until the father can work again? I feel as if I wanted to do something for the poor creatures. You've no idea how melancholy I felt as I listened to that boy, and angry, at the same time, that nobody had thought of helping him."

"It is really a very good notion," said Val. "Just fancy if it were one's own case—to think——"

"I hate nonsense!" angrily interrupted Rose. "You know perfectly well it could never be *our* case under any circumstances, so where's the use of inventing an hypothesis?"

"Do you think the girls would agree?" said Val, hesitatingly.

"They *must* agree if I want them to, so that's all about it. Some of them are very

good-natured too—but they must agree. I'll talk to them."

"You must ask Mrs. Potter if she has any objection."

"Pooh! However, I'm rather a favourite with her, because I behave tolerably well, and I make a good show pupil. She'll let me do as I like. That is all right. What I say I'll do, I do."

She carried out her scheme, and the subscription was regularly paid until her protégé was restored to the use of his limbs.

CHAPTER XVII.

VAL TRIES TO LEARN HER OWN HISTORY.

Miss ROSE's father, Mr. Atherley, was the leading music-master in the College. He was not an agreeable person by any means, but he was exceedingly polished in his manner, and a most able teacher. He quickly discovered that Val had a natural talent for music, and took a great deal of pains with her, partly because he experienced an artistic pleasure in developing her fine voice, and partly because he wished to gratify Lady Charrington, with whom he was acquainted. He took almost as much trouble with Miss Raymond as he did with his own daughter, Rose.

Val readily learnt what he set before her. She had a perfect passion for music, and her beautiful voice, already partially trained, so easily obeyed her, that it was a pleasure in-

stead of a labour to master the tasks which her instructor gave her. Rose noticed the attention which her father bestowed on Val, but her jealousy was not in the least excited.

“Papa gives you as much solid instruction as if you were going to be a professional,” she observed, one day. “I really imagine he would be glad if a reverse of fortune compelled you take up music as a means of livelihood—I mean, to become a singer, not a teacher.”

“Why do you think so?” asked Val.

“I don’t know,” answered Rose, shrugging her shoulders. “But I do think so.”

“Do you really think, then, that my voice is worth cultivating?”

“I know nothing about it. I suppose it must be, or my father wouldn’t take so much pains to develope its capabilities. He dislikes taking any trouble with people who are not endowed by nature with gifts of a high order. I know he thinks a good deal of me, though he never said so. Papa isn’t a man to pay compliments; but when you know him, you very soon find out the way to discover what he is thinking of.”

Sometimes the girls sang together, and their

voices united harmoniously, deliciously. Rose had a fine contralto, a little unmanageable occasionally, but of an excellent quality. Val's was a soprano of good range.

Mrs. Potter was greatly delighted at having two such brilliant show pupils, and did not disguise the fact that she experienced undoubted grief at the prospect of speedily losing them. Rose's education was considered almost complete, and Val's term had nearly expired.

According as the time for their separation grew near, Rose became more marked in her expressions of friendship, and regret that it should be so short-lived.

"I suppose I shall see nothing of you after we leave this place," she said many times. "It's a great pity. I like you better than any girl I ever knew before. You must not forget me, Val. You are a nice girl, and if I had a brother I'd make him marry you. You will hear of *me*, though, for I intend to make a name and become a famous singer."

"Oh, we shall see each other sometimes, I hope," replied Val, one day. "Why should we not?"

Rose shrugged her shoulders impatiently, after her fashion.

"You're a ninny; and so am I, for taking it into my head to like you."

"Why so?"

"Don't bother me. You know nothing of the world, no more than a baby; and I foresee you'll have to buy your experience. Now I haven't lived very long, but I've made good use of my time, and looked about me."

Rose did not choose to explain to her young friend that the difference which she supposed to exist between their social positions rendered it impossible that they could associate when they left school, and improbable that they would ever meet in society.

Lady Charrington was in her sunniest humour when Val went from school to her future home. She received the young girl with as much kindness and cordiality as if, instead of a poor dependent, she had been in reality a near relative. She frankly expressed approval of the appearance and manners of her protégée, and looked at her with a smile of encouragement.

"You are very well—very well indeed. You are absolutely prettier than any of the belles of this season. You are exceedingly graceful and lady-like. I think we shall be able to do

something for you. Perhaps you may even make a good match. Many girls with less pretensions have done very well, my dear. You shall stay with me as my companion. I ought to explain to you—I wish you distinctly to understand, with a view to prevent future disappointment, that you are to be my humble companion—nothing more.”

Val felt a sense of humiliation, which she with difficulty repressed. She had not, it is true, expected to occupy a very distinguished position in Lady Charrington’s household, but the half condescending, half good-natured tone irritated her.

“Madam,” she replied, “I accept whatever—whatever you——”

“I mean to be very kind to you, my dear. But it is an awkward thing to commence with false ideas, and I cannot help observing that you have notions which are sadly at variance with your actual position in life.”

“Will you tell me—will you——” Val could get no farther. Her voice seemed to desert her.

“I will be candid with you, now, but I have no desire to resume the subject at any future time. Of your father I have no know-

ledge whatever. I never even saw him. But he was a very humble person. It was my lord who took an interest in him."

"Was he related to Lord Charrington?" asked Val, timidly.

"Certainly not—certainly not," answered Lady Charrington, a little haughtily.

"And my mother?"

"I know nothing about your mother."

"Was she related to you, or to Lord Charrington?" again asked Val.

The Countess drew back with a marked gesture of surprise and anger.

"Who suggested to you such singular—such audacious ideas?" she demanded, frowning. Her frown was very terrible, because so rare. Val shrank; then, the next instant, inspired by the recollection that this opportunity, once lost, could never be recalled, she caught Lady Charrington's skirt.

"Nobody has said anything to me about it," she cried, in a low, eager, apologetic tone. "I thought—I fancied—I——"

"Understand *distinctly* that you are in no way related to me," said Lady Charrington, coldly, after a moment's pause. "I cannot conjecture how such an extraordinary delusion could have entered your brain."

“My father—my mother—are they yet living? How is it—pardon my asking you these questions, madam—but, oh, you do not know how I have yearned to know—to learn!”

She looked so pleadingly, so beseechingly, and her accent was so touching, that Lady Charrington relented.

“Your wish is very natural, child. I will tell you all I know of your history, and then we need not touch on this topic again. Your father was a musician named Raymond. Some years ago—while you were yet a child—my lord was partly the cause of his meeting with an accident which disabled him for some time from following his usual avocation. He became ill, in fact, and we had to provide for his wife and children until he recovered. I foolishly took a fancy to your pretty face, and charged myself with your welfare.”

“And then?” anxiously demanded Val, who had her eyes fixed on the face of her protectress.

“Then. Oh, you remained with me—with us, for some time. My sister-in-law took a fancy to you, and offered to educate you. Your parents agreed to her offer, and you have stayed with us ever since.”

“Where are my father and mother?”

“Your mother — well — your mother — is—it is——”

“My mother is dead? I always thought so, though I have never spoken of her to any one. And my father, madam?”

“I” — Lady Charrington hesitated, unable to shape her thoughts into words. Val guessed the reason of the pause.

“He also is dead?”

“My child, I do not know.”

“You don’t know?” Val eagerly clasped her hands, bending forward to gaze into the face of her protectress. “Why—how—why don’t you know?”

“There is every reason to presume that it is—that he is—that he cannot be living, or the probability is that he would have come forward to claim you; but Lord Charrington made careful inquiries on the death of your mother, and was unable to ascertain anything of his movements except that—could not learn anything of him beyond the fact that he was not to be found.”

“I don’t understand. Is there any mystery?”

“There is no mystery beyond this—that, if

living, it is a very strange proceeding for your father to leave you without taking the slightest notice of you for so many years. It is impossible that he could have resisted at least endeavouring to see you, especially as he lost all his other children, with the exception, I believe, of one of his boys."

"I had brothers and sisters, then?"

"You had."

"And they are all dead. Have I any relations—any one whom I would have a right to love?"

"I don't know. Poor people are not often anxious to claim kindred with those who might prove a burden to them."

"I would not be a burden to any one," answered Val, drawing herself up proudly.

"They could not tell that, my dear. However, do you understand your position more clearly than you did?"

"I understand that I am a poor girl who has no one on earth to care for her—for my father, if he is living, can care very little for me. I have no one to depend on, save myself—and you, dearest lady. Yes—I think I understand better now."

"Remember, Valentine, that I have not

told you what little I know of your history through a desire to wound your feelings, but from the wish, if possible, to spare you future mortification. If you fancied yourself a young lady, entitled by birth to enter on a footing of equality the scenes where you would see many other girls, with not a tithe of your attractions and personal recommendations, warmly welcomed, you would perhaps be hurt and indignant by being denied admittance at the very threshold. You are my humble companion, nothing more, so long as you like to stay with me. Should you tire of me, or find an opportunity of bettering your condition, or prefer being a governess, or take any situation for which your talents may qualify you, I shall be very glad to assist you as far as I can, and to do whatever service it may be in my power to afford you."

"Thank you, you are very kind," replied Val, in a low, constrained tone.

"You do not think me cruel for having put these facts so plainly before you?"

"No—oh no, madam," answered Val, sadly; "I am glad you have told me."

"Indeed, I should not have touched on them, as I have already assured you, had I

not feared the effect of future disappointments. With regard to money matters"—Val drew back—"I shall allow you a liberal salary—we will arrange it formally to-morrow. You have already an income of thirty pounds a year, left to you by my sister-in-law. You will have more than sufficient for dress and other expenses, and will be able, perhaps, to save a certain sum for the future."

Val scarcely heard these sentences, so intently preoccupied was she by what the Countess had said regarding her past history, and respecting her parents. She bent down her head in silence.

"I think we now understand each other clearly. I mean to be very kind to you, and to do what I can to make you happy; we shall agree very well, I think; you seem quiet and docile, and have a good many attractive qualities. To-morrow we will have a settled business arrangement, and, for the future, we will not touch on the subject upon which we have been talking this morning. You understand all that I have been saying?"

"Yes, madam."

"Very well." And Lady Charrington, with an encouraging smile, kissed the orphan girl, and then quitted the room.

Val remained for a long time in precisely the same attitude into which she had fallen while listening to Lady Charrington's explanation of her future position—her head bent down, her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes fixed on the ground. She was more than surprised to discover that she was not related to the Countess: she was bewildered, astounded. She tried, without effect, to pierce the mystery which apparently surrounded herself. The history which she had just heard was clear in some respects, but cloudy in others. The more she endeavoured to comprehend it, the more difficult it seemed for her to do so.

“Let me begin at the beginning,” she murmured, covering her face with her hands, to concentrate her ideas. “I am not related to Lady Charrington; I am an orphan: at least, it is not known whether my father is alive or dead. He was a musician—what kind of musician? He was injured by Lord Charrington—in what way? Why did he leave me in the care of Lord Charrington if he had no claim of relationship? I wish my lady was not so distant; I should like to ask her several things. She is so cold—yet no, she is not cold.”

She paused, and looked up with a puzzled, half-distressed air.

“Why did my lady take so much trouble about me—why did she send me to school, if she took no interest in my future welfare? Yet why should she deny that I was a relative, or that I belonged to her family?—she has no reason to be ashamed of me, because if she had, she would not let me stay in her house. She likes me, though not much. Then I think she is one of those people who don’t care much about anybody. I wish I were like other girls, who have parents and people who love them. I have not even anybody to talk to, for I am afraid of my lady. Oh, if my father were really living! But what does it matter? He cannot care for me at all. It is very bitter. Who am I—what am I? My lady’s humble companion! Humble companion!” she repeated, starting up, and walking to and fro, with an indignant aspect, over the superb carpet. “I won’t be her humble companion. Never.” She stamped her foot with impatient anger. The next instant she caught her reflected face in one of the immense mirrors. “I am proud,” she added, ironically. “Proud! you have good reason to be proud, truly, Miss Ray-

mond," curtseying to her shadowed resemblance; "I must be somebody's companion, or a governess, or a teacher—perhaps a poor resigned creature like Miss Estcourt. I thought I was a young lady. I don't mind having to earn my livelihood, but it irritates me to be treated as my lady seems disposed to treat me—with a kind of half good-natured tolerance. If my father were alive, and claimed me, I would work as hard as I could for him; I would not grudge any labour. Oh, it is wretched to have any kind of mystery surrounding one. I have never been very happy, nor have I enjoyed much love or affection, but I did not know there was any torment in store for me. I shall never be able to think of anything but this cruel suspense. Is there no way of finding out whether my father is alive?"

The same evening, disregarding Lady Charrington's injunction, she recurred to the subject.

"You said my father was a musician?" she observed, suddenly looking up from the book from which she was reading aloud; "what kind of musician?"

"I do not know; he played on the harp, I

believe," replied Lady Charrington, with a gesture of weariness.

"Was he clever? did people talk much about him?"

The Countess looked at her, then hesitated a moment. "It would be unkind, and perfectly unnecessary, to tell her that he was a street performer," she thought. "My dear," she answered, aloud, "I know nothing of him. I never saw him. I have told you all I know on the subject. It is useless endeavouring to cross-examine me—a mere waste of time, I assure you. I can perfectly comprehend and sympathise with your anxiety to know something of your past history—of your parents; but take a word of counsel—dismiss the subject from your mind, if you can; think no more of it. It will be unprofitable occupation for your thoughts, and serve no purpose beyond unfitting you for everything. Be content. If you could only believe me, you are in a most fortunate position—raised far beyond what you had originally any right to expect. Your parents could never have educated you; you would have had nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope."

"What have I to hope for now, or to look

forward to?" demanded Val, a little bitterly.

"You occupy a position which many young ladies even of most respectable birth and expectations would be glad to take. You have youth, health, beauty—yes, I will say so—you have even talent of a certain kind. There is only one thing that I see of a dark or gloomy nature to annoy you, and that is the apparent uncertainty regarding your father; but I think you may justly conclude that he is dead—I do not say it unfeelingly, my dear—for if he were living, it is not at all probable he could have resisted letting you know of his existence. You must try to be satisfied, and to dismiss from your mind the absurd notions which you appear to have adopted."

Val did not reply. She could say nothing, in fact, for she required time to analyse her own feelings and to arrange her ideas.

Lady Charrington threw herself back on the sofa, and apparently buried herself in the novel which she took from the listless hand of Val. Her eyes were fixed, not on the open page, but on Val's face. This scrutiny, of which the young girl was perfectly unconscious, lasted for some time.

“She is a stupid, disagreeable, discontented little fool,” she irefully reflected. “She is ungrateful. I have absolutely made a place for her, and, I may say, given her so much a year for nothing; for I have never needed a companion in my life, and have not the slightest necessity for one, unless for the sake of society in my more lonely hours. If she does not become more good-humoured, and learn to appreciate her real position, we must part.”

As it was near the close of the London season, Lady Charrington went in a few days to the Grange, one of her houses in Sussex, taking Val with her. By this time Val had become outwardly satisfied, and better disposed to regard with content the change in her circumstances—to resign her claims to be considered and treated as a young lady, and to undertake the duties of useful companion. She could not rid herself of the idea which had so completely fixed itself in her mind—that she was related to Lady Charrington, and that for some reason the great dame refused to acknowledge her. At the same time, she would have been perfectly unable to assign any grounds for thinking this, unless it was that she had been so long regarded as a con-

nexion of the Charrington family by her schoolfellows.

The change, the comparative freedom which she enjoyed, and Lady Charrington's general kindness, operated favourably with Val, and restored her good spirits and proportionate good humour. She began to understand, too, that it would be wise to endeavour to ignore the troublesome thoughts which had pestered her, and to try to take advantage of present circumstances. She therefore advanced marvellously in the good graces of her protectress, who began to find her very agreeable company. The poor child was, nevertheless, very lonely; for her mistress would not condescend to treat her even distantly as a friend, and kept the line of demarcation very strictly defined. Sometimes my lady would laugh, jest, give her anecdotes and reminiscences of the great world, but always in the tone of a superior. Yet she rigidly enjoined on the young girl that she was not to speak freely with even Mrs. Hammond, the housekeeper. Very often Val looked back with yearning to her school-days, and to the companions whom she had left for ever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VAL FANCIES SHE DISCOVERS A CLUE.

VAL had very little amusement—scarcely anything to assist in withdrawing her thoughts from herself. Lady Charrington did not object to her taking frequent walks in the neighbourhood, which was a very picturesque part of the country; and she had a great source of pleasure in reading the books which were sent from the famous London library to which the Countess subscribed. The idle, aimless existence she was of necessity obliged to lead, however, deprived her of the strength to successfully combat the morbid fancies, the vain wishes which still assailed her.

She was unhappy, without being able to afford any just reason why she should be so; she would frequently in her heart accuse Lady Charrington of injustice, and reproach

herself the next instant with being ungrateful. She was harassed and haunted by melancholy forebodings, yet forced to seem cheerful and without a care. This time she always looked back on as the saddest period of her life. Had she known the entire truth with regard to her own history, she would probably have acknowledged that she was peculiarly fortunate in having risen to so respectable a position, though even then the uncertainty hanging over her father's fate would have tormented her. But she was in reality almost ignorant of her antecedents, and of the facts surrounding her early life.

"I'd rather have positive hard work to do than live in this way," she murmured to herself one night, as she leaned her temples against the iron balustrade of a balcony overhanging the garden. "I am so lonely—I am so unhappy. Nobody takes any interest in me, or seems to care a straw for me. I wish I had somebody—anybody to love."

She sighed, and pressed her forehead against the cold iron. She remained thus for several minutes, when her attention was arrested by the sound of voices from the open window of the room beneath.

“But then, Mrs. Hammond,” said a voice, which she recognised as that of Mrs. Jessop, Lady Charrington’s waiting-woman, “why should my lady deny that she was a relation? It isn’t alone that she don’t acknowledge her, but she positively denies that she belongs to the family any way. T’other day, when old Lady Marston was here, my lady flushed up quite indignant-like when the old dowager asked if Miss was a niece or a cousin. ‘No,’ says my lady, like this, bridling up, ‘she is only a pottejay,’ she says.”

“I have my opinion,” replied Mrs. Hammond, the housekeeper. “All great families has their secrets, and our family isn’t going to be an exception, I suppose.”

“Secrets?” eagerly exclaimed Mrs. Jessop. “O, do say—what, how? Do tell.”

“No, I have nothing but my own ideas to go on; nothing but——”

“Nothing but suspicions?”

“Suspicious isn’t a word to use, Mrs. J., in talking of the doings of a family like this.”

“Well, we shan’t fall out about a word, shall we, Mrs. Hammond?” said the other, coaxingly. “I meant to say that you had no particular ground for your — for thinking,

you know, that Miss is a relation of the family?"

"Well, it's a story, and if you'll promise not to say a word about it——"

"O, you may depend on my never uttering a syllable."

"Because my lady mightn't like my letting out any of the family affairs. But as you promise, I'll tell you just exactly what I think."

Val reflected that she ought not, perhaps, to remain, as she was probably on the point of hearing something which Lady Charrington particularly desired might not be known. She tried to fly the temptation, but as she rose, she found herself unable to move from the spot. The anxiety to gain some clue to the mystery which she imagined enveloped her origin was so strong that she was utterly powerless to leave the place.

"I have been for many years in the family," resumed Mrs. Hammond, after a moment's deliberation. "The late Lord C. had two sisters. The elder one, Catherine, died some years ago, unmarried. The other, Angela—now mind, you must never so much as breathe a sentence of what I am going to tell you——"

“Not for gold untold, Mrs. H. Never fear. Do go on ; there’s a dear.”

“Well, Lady Angela—that was my lord’s younger sister—she fell in love with a handsome young man, and insisted she would marry him. My lord was in a rage, because this young man—I forget his name, it began either with an M or a Y—I’m not sure which—because he wasn’t so good as she was by birth, and was poor into the bargain. The brother and sister used to have such battles about it—she saying she would marry anybody she pleased, and he declaring she should not be allowed to disgrace the family.”

“Well?” demanded Jessop, when the other paused.

“Well, the long and the short of it was that the young couple ran away together, and from that time to this, they were never heard of. They were a handsome pair, though foolish and romantic. My lord was wild. He ordered that her name was never to be mentioned in his hearing again, and vowed he never would forgive them.”

“But what has this to do with Miss R.?” asked the waiting-woman.

Val instantly conjectured that they had been talking of her mother!

"There is a portraait of Lady Angela in the picture gallery, between a dark man in a soldier's coat, and that lady with the powdered hair and white satin dress. You just look at that, and if you don't see that it's the exact image of Miss Raymond, you may put me down for a blind bat."

"You don't mean to say——?"

"That is the very thing I *do* mean to say," answered Mrs. Hammond, triumphantly. "You see, the thing is clear. Lady Angela disappearing, her brother angry, her name not to be mentioned, this girl turning up—and she the very moral of what her mother used to be, with the same tall figure, and beautiful dark eyes, and the same soft, gracious way of talking, and just the same way of floating along, if one might use the expression."

"It does seem like it, to be sure, when one comes to think it over," observed Jessop, reflectively.

"Of course it does. I've thought it for some time, though I've said nothing about it."

"But what possible motive could my lady have for concealing it?"

“That’s more than I can tell. It seems very queer. Perhaps Miss Raymond’s mother is still living, and doesn’t choose to come forward, because of her marriage, you know—or a thousand things. Perhaps it will be different when Miss comes of age, For she’s only about seventeen or eighteen now. Perhaps my lady don’t know the rights of the thing at all—though that isn’t likely, or why has she got the young lady here? I can’t properly make it out.”

“It does seem like a story,” observed Mrs. Jessop. “I wonder where her mother is.”

“Abroad, most likely; or dead, may be.”

“Now, supposing her mother is dead, and she hasn’t any brothers or sisters, and she was of age—what would happen?”

“Why, she’d be able to make the present Lord Charrington give up the title and all the estates, and all he’s ever got out of ’em, for it comes in the female line, you know.”

“Lor! I don’t think my lady would relish that at all, for I used to think she wanted to marry the present lord. She used to seem very sweet on him, and he used to visit her very often when they was in London.”

“It seems to me to be a very queer affair

altogether. But it's no business of mine. Now mind, you must never breathe a word to a living soul of what I've been saying, or I'll never tell you a thing again."

"Could you think I'd be capable of such black treachery and deceitfulness, my dear Mrs. H.?" responded Jessop, in a reproachful tone.

"Well, I don't think you would, or I should not have told you. And mind, after all's said and done, it may not be the case. It's only my guess, you know. I've nothing to go on except my own ideas, you understand."

"To be sure—of course. I understand all that, Mrs. H."

Their voices gradually grew more indistinct, as if the speakers were retreating from the room, and Val heard no more. What she had thus heard, however, was quite enough to occupy her thoughts. It seemed as if an extraordinary revelation had been made to her, though she could scarcely credit what Mrs. Hammond had suggested. It seemed impossible, yet so plausible.

She remained for a long time striving to arrange her ideas.

"I don't think my lady can know of the

possibility of a relationship existing between us. Her entire manner and conduct assures me that she is ignorant of it. There is no reason why she should suppress the fact of my being her niece. Yet how is it that I am here? It seems all tangled. I cannot unravel it. My brain is in a whirl. Shall I tell Lady Charrington what I have heard?"

She pondered for some time, debating the advisability of informing her protectress of the secret which she had reason to suppose she had discovered. Finally, however, she decided that it would be best to wait a little ; for something might occur to elucidate what at present seemed so dark.

One thing she determined on, which was, to examine the picture to which the housekeeper had referred. She wanted to ascertain if the resemblance which that worthy individual had seen, really existed.

The next morning, the moment she could escape from the boudoir of Lady Charrington, who was excessively exacting, though she was continually repeating that she never required the society of any one, Val went direct to the picture-gallery.

She found the portrait without difficulty. It

was that of a handsome girl of some sixteen summers, dressed in the costume of 1827 or 1828—a gown of taffety, with gigot sleeves, and a muslin canezou spencer, a waist like an hour-glass, confined by a broad ribbon and buckle, a huge Leghorn hat, lined with pink satin and loaded with broad ribbon. The hair was arranged in short formal ringlets on either side of the face, just allowing a pair of long pearl earrings to appear.

Val gazed at this portrait for a long time. The face was undoubtedly handsome. It was oval, rather fair, with a roseate flush on the cheeks; the eyes were large, dark, and sparkling. The nose was straight and well-shaped; the lips delicately cut, and smiling. There was an easy grace in the attitude, which showed a consciousness of being a person of some importance. At the same time, the impression which the portrait conveyed was not that of pleasure. There was an indication of mingled audacity and obstinacy, or selfishness, which repelled as much as the physical beauty attracted.

The lonely girl, in looking at this picture, felt none of those yearnings of love and reverence which a child might be supposed to experience in contemplating the shadowed

portrait of a mother. On the contrary, she felt an indescribable revulsion of feeling when she had examined the portrait for a few minutes. This was not the mother of whom she had sometimes dreamt—she instinctively knew that she could never have loved this woman.

There was not the slightest likeness to be traced between the pictured face and that which so eagerly scanned it, except that both had dark eyes and a delicate complexion. The expression was totally different. In the countenance of the beautiful aristocrat there was nothing to be discerned but hardness, and an evident desire to attract admiration. In the face of Val, on the contrary, the chief expression was an earnest, pleading, yearning wish for sympathy, for love.

Val drew from her pocket a small hand mirror, belonging to the Countess, with which she had provided herself, and gazed alternately at her own reflection and at the picture on the wall. She examined feature by feature, trying to find out the resemblance which Mrs. Hammond had declared existed. She was unable to satisfy herself, though she tried every expedient, walking round the gallery two or three times, then coming back to the picture sud-

denly, in order to see it with an unjaded eye. The investigation was, nevertheless, unsuccessful, and she finally abandoned it with a sigh of disappointment.

She then began walking up and down the gallery, striving to master and bring together the various points of the secret which she thought she had discovered. The story seemed clear enough. Some years before, the sister of Lord Charrington had fallen in love and eloped with a person of inferior rank. Lord Charrington had, in his anger, refused to even hear her name. She had disappeared: then there was a break in the history. The next link was the adoption, so to speak, of Val; the reserve, not to say mystery, observed with regard to her parents. Why should they take such an interest in her, if she had no claim whatever on them? How had she come into their charge? Why was Lady Charrington so unwilling to allude to her past? Why did she treat her so oddly—prescribing a certain limit to their friendship, yet not unfrequently being half cordial and free in manner? The chief question was, did Lady Charrington know of the probability of Val's being her niece, or did she not? If she did,

why did she conceal her knowledge ; if she did not, how was it that Val was living with her?

She had passed to and fro at least a dozen times, and had stopped to again contemplate the picture of Lord Charrington's sister, when she was abruptly startled by a clear, silvery voice, exclaiming—

“Have you fallen in love with Sir Rupert the Cruel?”

Val turned. It was Lady Charrington. * She was standing at a door which opened from the gallery on to a terrace. She looked gay and graceful, standing with her back to the sun ; a coquettish little hat shading her face.

“Guilty, guilty, by Saint Cupid! You blush—no, you absolutely turn pale! 'Tis no crime, child. He is a handsome fellow.”

She stepped within the gallery, and walked slowly across, followed by her Skye terrier. Val, who felt frightened, she knew not why, rose, and moved from the place where she had been standing.

“It is a fine picture—one of Lely's,” resumed Lady Charrington, who was in a genial humour. “There is a strange story about Sir Rupert in the family records—one of the

wildest, most improbable legends you can imagine. Were you really admiring him?"

Val shook her head. She could not speak.

"You were looking very intently at him, then. If you are captivated by his handsome face and dashing air, I must warn you that you have a rival in me. I lost my heart to him the first summer I came here. There are some fine pictures here," she continued, in a graver tone. "That is a lovely Murillo. There are several beautiful Dutch paintings."

"There are a great number of family portraits, in addition to this one of Sir Rupert, I believe?" asked Val, hesitatingly.

"Almost all the paintings on this side are family portraits. What a strange sensation it gives one, in this silent gallery, with nothing but the rustling of leaves and cawing of rooks outside, to contemplate these personages, so long vanished away. You are surprised to hear me moralise, are you not?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and called her terrier.

"Some of these heads are striking," observed Val, hoping to lead her to the subject of Lady Angela Venayne without appearing to do so.

“Yes. The collection belongs to the present Lord Charrington. He has been threatening for a long time to remove it, but he has procrastinated from year to year. He has been living abroad. That is a Lely—Jane, wife of the second Earl of Charrington. That is her husband, next her. This is James Alexander William, Viscount Malsden, eldest son of the third Earl. His history is curious.” She ran over an enumeration of the names; but when she came to the sister of the late Lord, she paused for an instant, and then passed it. “This is Sir Rupert Venayne.”

“This one, to judge by the dress, appears to be hung out of its right place,” remarked Val, indicating the portrait of Lady Angela.

“Yes; an accident, I presume—some mistake.”

“It is a beautiful head. Who is it?” Val asked with desperate courage.

“One of the sisters of Lord Charrington—the late earl, my husband,” answered my lady, carelessly. “Be quiet, Top,” addressing her dog.

“She is—she is——” Val could not frame any form of words, or even shape a distinct thought. Lady Charrington looked at her.

"She is what?" asked she, sharply.

Val was silent.

"Come, it is stupid losing time here. Come out and walk on the terrace; there is a delicious breeze blowing. Come, Val. Come here, Topsy, you obstinate mite."

Lady Charrington went out by the door opening on the terrace, followed by Val. They walked to and fro for some time, Lady Charrington laughing at the freaks of her dog, Val trying to think of something which would lead to the subject on which she had been meditating so intently for so many hours. She seemed so stupid this morning that she railed at herself. But vainly. She felt as if she were half-asleep, and trying to rouse herself. At last the Countess, who, finding that Val would not talk, had occupied herself in making Topsy play tricks, went to dress for a ride, and the opportunity was lost.

This suspense, this waiting for a solution of a mystery which she was not even certain had an existence, was very wearisome to the poor girl, and had an exceedingly injurious effect on her mind. She felt that there was something withheld from her; in that she was right, but wrong in the conclusions she drew.

Day after day, she sought vainly for a favourable opportunity to resume the discussion of her past history with Lady Charrington. She found it impossible, partly from her own cowardice, partly from something in my lady's manner which repelled confidence. These two women lived in the same house, met every day, talked together constantly, and were on the best possible terms, yet neither had the most distant conception of the thoughts of her friend. How frequently do we not find people thus dwelling together, knowing less of each other's actual existence than they might do were they a thousand miles apart—wanting the magic telegraph, sympathy.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANN HEATH'S COTTAGE.

THUS the time wore on. Every day Val's position grew more irksome. The effort to maintain a cheerful demeanour when with her mistress was often most painful. The desire for a change, for anything to break the monotony and suspense by which she was tortured, grew more keen every day. This was not the life she had looked forward to; and discontent and irritation made rapid inroads on a temper naturally good.

After many reflections, she resolved to tell Lady Charrington that she would greatly prefer to leave her, and go into the world. The difficulty was, how to communicate this wish, for she anticipated that her protectress would consider her ungrateful.

Without doubt, Lady Charrington would

have been astounded. What could Val possibly wish for? She was a thousand degrees better situated than she could have had any right to expect. She was well lodged, well dressed, enjoyed an excellent table, had nothing to do, and received a very good salary. She was treated with civility—with absolute kindness, if occasionally she suffered from caprice.

It must be understood, however, that Val's discontent did not arise from ingratitude, or unwillingness to accept what she ought to have regarded as a most advantageous place in the world. She had been allowed to grow up with the idea that she was a member of Lady Charrington's family—a person who had a right to be treated as an equal, to be permitted to share moderately such pleasures as it was in Lady Charrington's power to obtain. But she unexpectedly found herself reduced to the position of an inferior, regarded as a servant, placed pretty much on a level with Mrs. Jessop, Topsy, and all Lady Charrington's other personal attendants: this, too, united with the suspicion that she was the legitimate heiress to the title and estates of the family.

The Countess' caprice displayed itself in the most irritating form. She was always

gay, always smiling; but she would say the most galling things with an air of charming unconsciousness, stinging with pins, worrying with trifles so almost invisible that a bystander could not have perceived that anything was uttered to cause pain. Perpetually amiable, she was yet unendurable.

One afternoon, my lady went to visit some friends who had just returned from a sojourn on the Continent. Val, who felt more lonely than usual, and who had finally determined that, let the consequences be what they might, she must go,—Val went out for a solitary ramble.

The neighbourhood was most picturesque, and there was a choice of pleasant walks. Val selected the one which she generally favoured, which led towards a leafy wood about a mile and a-half from the Grange, intending, when she reached the shady retreat, to sit down and read.

She had walked some distance, and was crossing a bridle-path, when she perceived a child, lying on its face on the ground, and sobbing bitterly. Val paused, and stooping over the little thing, asked what was the matter? The child did not look up, or take any notice of

the address, except by suddenly checking its sobs. She therefore lifted it on its feet, when it stared at her, stupidly, its round, chubby face streaked with tears and dirt. Val, without speaking, attempted to take from the dirty, fat hand a puppet, some of the strings of which had snapped, probably during some experiment instituted with a view to discovering how it was made to dance.

The child, who did not utter a word, though he ceased crying, closed his little fat hand tighter, and hung his head.

“Were you crying because you had broken your toy?” asked Val, smiling kindly.

The urchin looked up at her, as if he fancied she must be a conjuror to guess the cause of his grief so readily, then looked down at the figure, with wide-opened eyes; then, on the question being repeated, nodded.

“Shall I mend it for you?”

The child, surprised still more, nodded again, but did not relinquish the treasure, afraid, perhaps, of losing it.

“Well, you must give it to me, and I’ll try if I can mend it.”

She sat down on the stump of a tree, and commenced her task.

"There!" she said, at last, in a triumphant tone, holding up the puppet, and dancing it before the delighted eyes of its chubby owner. "See, I have mended it so nicely. Come, are you not *very* much obliged to me—eh?"

The little boy remained silent.

"Come, say 'thank you.'"

The child nodded, too much ashamed or too much pre-occupied to speak, or perhaps frightened by the novelty of his situation.

"Am I not very good to take so much trouble for you?" said Val, who felt greatly inclined to laugh.

"Ess," said the urchin, with his eyes still fixed on the bundle of painted sticks, which his new friend retained.

At this moment, the sound of a horse's hoofs ringing on the narrow path made Val look up.

The rider who was approaching was a gentleman of some thirty years of age, with a handsome face and a well-proportioned figure, a slightly bronzed complexion, and dark brown hair and whiskers.

He checked his horse when close to Val, and addressing her courteously, asked if that

was the direct way to the Grange? Val replied politely, assuring him that it was; he thanked her, and rode on at a slightly accelerated pace.

Naturally shy, and not having had any opportunity to rid herself of a certain school-girl bashfulness, Val blushed as she spoke to the handsome stranger, to her deep vexation. She could not resist the impulse to look after his receding figure, and as she gazed he turned in the saddle, with the evident intention of once more regarding her.

Their glances met, and both felt as much embarrassed and disconcerted as people generally do under similar circumstances. Both pretended that they had not been looking at all, and averted their eyes as quickly as possible.

The stranger had just disappeared in the distance when another stranger came in view—a short, clumsy girl, who looked eagerly from side to side, as if searching for something. Val's young friend, who had been gaping at the gentleman on horseback, was now waiting for his puppet, which the young lady, recollecting his presence, handed to him.

“Oh! it's here you are, is it?” cried the girl,

running up. "I beg pard'n, Miss, I wus lookin' fur our Billy. Come along, will ye. Whatever ha' ye bin doin' wi' yerself—we thout ye wus lost? Come home, or I'll wallop ye finely, see if I don't."

A dispute, carried on in no measured terms, immediately commenced between the urchin and his sister. Val was obliged to interfere, to prevent the sister, as the biggest and strongest, from inflicting summary chastisement on the brother, who was bellowing like a young bull.

Having succeeded in pacifying the belligerents, Val walked beside them. The girl immediately began a dialogue—or rather a monologue, for she did all the talking, dragging her brother along with the confident air of a woman of forty, and marching with a most strong-minded, independent spirit.

In a few minutes the party arrived at one of the cottages on the outskirt of the village. The mother of the two children was standing at the door. The moment she caught sight of her errant son she darted on him, and shook him, until Val interceded for him, when she despatched him into the interior of the dwelling. She then invited the

young lady to come in and sit down for a bit.

"I know you, Miss, very well," she observed, "tho' you don't know me. You are Miss Raymond? I often go up to the Grange, to do little odd jobs, bless ye; and you've spoke to me more than once, thof you don't remember me now."

Val accepted her invitation, and sat down in the small, clean kitchen. The good woman, glad of the opportunity for indulging in a gossip, immediately began chattering away, giving Val innumerable reminiscences of a more or less interesting nature. Suddenly she heard a loud shriek from the back-yard, and ran off in great trepidation, fearing that her son Billy had "got into new mischief," and threatening to "give it him like anything."

Val, left alone, chanced to idly take up a book which was lying on a little table near the window. It was an odd volume of old-fashioned plays, by Colman, Congreve, and other writers of the last century. Its binding was in a very dilapidated condition, though it was placed, evidently as an ornament, on the top of a common, much-used work-box,

and overshadowed by a blue jug filled with flowers.

The young girl, without thinking, opened the book, and unintentionally, idly, glanced at the fly-leaf. She started as she read the name.

Instead of "Ann Heath," inscribed in hieroglyphics, there was written, in a very lady-like, though somewhat thin and angular hand, "Lucy Raymond, Nov. 23, 1838."

Although the name of Raymond was by no means an uncommon one, Val was so much astonished to set it here written, that she was unable to raise her eyes from the page, or to lay down the book. She was still silently gazing on it, when Mrs. Heath returned.

"That boy of mine will be the death of me," she cried, as she entered from the little yard. "What do you think he was about? Thof I'm sure you'll never guess, Miss, if ye wus at it from now to this day twel'month. Well, nobbody knows what 'tis to hev' child'n, but them as has 'em. Of all——"

"Excuse me—who does this book belong to?" inquired Val, interrupting her.

"That book—bless me—let me see—O, that book?" responded Mrs. Heath. "Oh, yes, to

be sure. It belonged to a young—leastways, a youngish person, as wus stayin' with us—let's see—well, I sh'd say, about ten year ago—she and her child'n."

Val paused for a moment. "What kind of person?"

"What kind o' person? Well, let's see now. Tallish, I sh'd say—not as tall as me, by half a head. Goodish figgure,—but thin—I'm stoutish. I like a woman to be stout. Well, really, I hardly know what to say about her. 'Tis so long ago. She wasn't what I'd call a pleasant body. She was allus grumblin'—never pleased—nothing seemed to suit her."

"Was she—I mean—You did not like her, then?"

"Well, I can't say as I did. She was so lazy—never dreamt o' doin' a thing. But I beg your pard'n a hundred times, to be sure, Miss. Maybe she was one of your family—bein' the same name—tho' I can't think so, she bein' a poor person, as I might say, and you a young lady."

"I know nothing of her," answered Val, with truth; for had she thought the Lucy Raymond of whom they were speaking was related to her, she would have gladly seized on

the opportunity of learning something of her. At the same time, she had a dreamy, undefined idea that this Lucy Raymond was connected in some way with the Lady Angela Venayne of whom she had thought so often lately.

"She wusn't your style at all," continued Mrs. Heath, "tho' she'd the same name. But then the name ain't at all a uncommon one."

"If you have no objection, I should like to have this book," said Val, hesitatingly.

"I'm sure you're very welcome. 'Tisn't much of a present. But you're free to take it, and welcome. 'Tis odd, when one thinks of it, that she should have the same name as you. It was the late Lord, too, as sent her."

Val started. "He sent her—why?"

"Oh, I don't know—t'ain't likely my lord'd tell me the why and the wherefore of what he chose to do."

"And she had her children with her?"

"Yes—two little girls, nice little things they wus, and a little boy,—not unlike my Bill there. Good gracious! there I've been talkin', and my pot's b'ilin' over, and my man's comin' home for dinner, too, in half a hour."

She was thrown into such a state of flurry

that Val saw it would be useless to try to resume the dialogue just then; and accordingly she said good-morning, and went away.

When she returned to the Grange, she found Lady Charrington in the best possible humour after her drive. The Countess said nothing of any one having called, but she was full of liveliness and fun, talking and laughing till Val thought she was crazy. After dinner, when they were in the drawing-room, Lady Charrington was almost unable to control her spirits. She went up and down the apartment, and glanced more than once at her reflection in the mirrors. Her eyes were glittering with some joyous emotion, and there was a perfect flutter in her manner, most unusual with her.

Suddenly she stopped before Val, and in a laughing voice, observed

“I suppose a girl like you would call five or six and thirty quite old—for a woman, I mean?”

Val did not see the drift of the question, and was at a loss for an answer. Lady Charrington, however, ran on to another subject, without waiting for a reply, and then made her dog go through all his tricks.

CHAPTER XX.

LADY CHARRINGTON TAKES A DRIVE.

LADY Charrington's good humour and high spirits, so far from evaporating, seemed to increase every day. She was so amiable that Val began to think of reconsidering her determination with regard to leaving her. She did not communicate the secret of her gaiety to Val, but sometimes she indulged her with hints of so obscure a nature that the young girl was perfectly unable to comprehend them.

Val carefully hid the book which she had found in Mrs. Heath's cottage, though she had no particular idea that it would ever be of any service in elucidating what she still persisted in considering a mystery. She never alluded to her adventure, and her accidental discovery; and of course could not ask any question about the handsome stranger who had inquired

the way to the Grange. Of course she did not marvel that my lady should not mention him, for he was doubtless one of her numerous fashionable friends. It did not occur to Val either, to connect Lady Charrington's gaiety and amiability with the advent of this gentleman. Curiously enough, although the Countess was still young, and beautiful, and rich, nobody ever thought of the possibility of her marrying again, or of her having lovers. Even in the whirl of the London "season," when it was acknowledged that she often eclipsed the loveliest débutantes in grace and finish, no one ever approached her as a suitor, though not unfrequently she was consulted on affairs of the heart, as if she was an experienced dowager, able and willing to give advice.

One afternoon, about a week subsequent to her accidental visit to Mrs. Heath, Val was descending the principal staircase, when she was arrested by the voice of a stranger in the hall, speaking to a servant. It was the voice of a man—of a gentleman—and was rich, full, and melodious. With involuntary curiosity, she peeped over the balustrade, and beheld the gentleman whom she had seen on the bye-road a few days before.

The rustling of her skirt, as she leaned forward, caused the stranger to look up. A slight gesture betrayed surprise; but as she instantly drew back, he averted his head.

Val heard the door close, and then she looked again over the balustrade, to ascertain if the visitor was gone. Two girls, who happened to come into the hall as the footman left it, began giggling and talking sufficiently loud for Val to hear what they were saying.

“The Captain’s a handsome fellow,” one remarked. “He looks so nice when he smiles. He’s ever so much younger than my lady, though. When I was in London——”

The girl caught sight of Miss Raymond at this moment, and without completing her observation, hastened down stairs with the other maid.

As they had so few visitors—for Lady Charrington lived very quietly—Val wondered that the Countess never alluded, even distantly, to this gentleman. She could not help fancying, however, that my lady had expected him with not a little eagerness this morning, and that she had wished to receive him alone—for she had sent Val away on a most frivolous pretext, which would keep the young girl engaged for

at least an hour, in re-arranging some shells and other toys in a cabinet.

When Val entered the drawing-room, Lady Charrington was radiant. She was ready dressed for going out, and was looking out of the window.

“Run and put on your hat, child,” she said to Val, “I am going for a drive in the pony-phæton, as the morning is so fine.”

Val, who, unlike her mistress, never elaborated her toilette to any great extent, was ready in a few minutes. She absolutely enjoyed the prospect of a drive, for she rarely went out with Lady Charrington, or had any recreation but walking and reading.

It was a bright sunshiny morning, and although the autumn was far advanced, it seemed almost the height of summer. The little Croydon basket-carriage which the Countess used in driving about the neighbourhood, was soon at the door, and the two ladies stepped into it. Lady Charrington prided herself on her skill in handling the reins, and she looked bewitching this morning, in her piquant straw hat and short jacket.

The little ponies were quite pleased to come out for a trot, and dashed forward in gallant

style. A few words exchanged, Lady Charrington and Val drove for some time in silence.

As they were passing down an inclined road, a waggon suddenly emerged from a turning, and came towards them. It was an enormous vehicle, and blocked up nearly the entire road.

“Annoying!” said Lady Charrington, with an impatient look. “I think there is room to pass, however; we cannot go back, that would be absurd. I wish we had returned a few minutes sooner. Fortunately, I am a skilful driver; you shall see how neatly I’ll navigate round that giant.”

She touched the ponies lightly with her whip, and they darted off at a quick pace. In a second they were close on the waggon; but just as they were passing there was a sudden jar—the wheels had come in contact, and the fragile basket-carriage was overturned.

Quicker than thought, Val sprang out. Lady Charrington, less agile, or not seeing her danger, did not move till the accident had happened.

The ponies, terrified by the crash, again

darted off, dragging the frail carriage at their heels. The whole affair occurred in almost a second.

What was Val's horror, on turning, to find Lady Charrington lying on the ground insensible! Her foot had been entangled, and she had consequently been unable to extricate herself in time, having been shaken off when the ponies raced down the road. Her forehead had struck against the wheel of the waggon, and, partly from terror, partly from the real injury she had sustained, she had fainted.

Val uttered a loud shriek for help; then, recovering her presence of mind, she raised her mistress, staunching the blood on her face with her handkerchief, and trying to rouse her from her deathly swoon.

The waggoner, who had been on the opposite side of his vehicle, and had been too stupid to notice the little carriage and its occupants before, now observed what had happened and called to his horses to stop. He approached Val with a stolid, good-natured air.

"Will you—will you run to one of those cottages for some one to help?" said Val, still supporting Lady Charrington on her knee.

The poor girl was in an agony of terror, and her face was ashy white, but she managed to speak with composure. The waggoner walked a short way towards the nearest cottage, then, observing a boy in a field on one side of the road, he called out to him—

“Hoy, oy say, you thar! Uz thar ony wummun fowk about?”

“What’s the matter?” demanded the boy, approaching.

“Whoy, matter enow, thof I don’t see it’s ony business o’ yourn. Thar’s a yooung wummun been killed, and anooother yooung wummun wants soomboddy to help her. Oy s’pose yull call that matter? Noo then, stoopid, do you look alive, and find some wummun as ken doo sutthin’ for her, or I’ll guv ye a crack wi’ moy whip as ’ull mak’ ye see more stars’n ever ye did in yer loife afore.”

Thus admonished, the lad, glancing at the two young ladies, ran to a cottage, and called to an elderly female, who was within.

“Mother, mother, you’re wanted. I say, here’s a young lady a lyin’ dead on the road. Come quick.”

“Goodness me, Ted. You’re the wickedest boy a breathin’, you are. I never knowed

anybody come up to you for tellin' lies. You ought to be ashamed o' yourself, that you ought, you young varmint, you worritin' young scamp, and I dare say you ar'n't a bit. Get along wi' ye," replied the old woman, indignantly and incredulously.

"There *is*, mother. Just you look and see if there ain't," reiterated the boy. "A young lady—a real young lady, dressed out and all."

"A young lady? My goodness. What an idea. Now, Ted, if you've told me another o' yer lies, I'll wallop ye as long as ever I can stand over ye, see if I don't, for you get wuss every day."

However, she came to the door, wiping the suds from her arms. She looked down the road, and saw that the boy was not uttering an untruth, for Val was still kneeling on the ground, supporting the apparently lifeless form of her friend. The old woman, without saying anything more, not even stopping to speak to the triumphant Ted, ran towards the young lady, who extended her hand with an air of earnest entreaty for help.

"Good gracious, Miss! Is she alive or dead?" she cried, on coming up.

"I cannot tell," answered Val, shuddering.

"I have been trying to revive her, but she is perfectly insensible. Help me to carry her to your cottage, I beseech you, and then we must send to the Grange. It is Lady Charrington."

"Lady Charrington! My good gracious! Lord alive!" The old woman lifted the Countess in her arms as readily as if she were an infant, and bore her quickly to the cottage, with innumerable ejaculations of horror, sympathy, and wonderment. The waggoner, having satisfied himself that his services were no longer required, whistled to his horses, and walked off, stolidly, thinking, too, that it might be as well to be out of the way, in case any disagreeable inquiries should be instituted as to the cause of the accident, and he might be implicated, spite of the fact that he had had nothing to do with it.

When they reached the cottage, the old woman, seeing that Val was evidently inexperienced, and half distracted, took on herself the direction of affairs. She laid Lady Charrington on her bed, and applied all the simple remedies she knew of, despatching her son Ted for the doctor; and then calling another son, and telling him to "run for his life" to the Grange.

Val was sitting by the window of the room in which the Countess was lying, watching for some one from the Grange, when she saw one of the footmen coming up the road. She ran down, and appeared at the door of the cottage.

“O, here you are, Miss,” cried the man, hastening towards her, with an aspect full of alarm. “We’ve been looking heverywhere for my lady and you. We’ve been suffering hagonies of terror, which Biber and Fidget came home a-dragging the basket-carriage at their ’eels, and we didn’t know what on hearth could a ’appened my lady and you, if I might so hexpress myself.”

“But Mrs. Hammond has surely received my message,” said Val.

“Not as I ham hawares of, Miss. Which I reely didn’t know as you’d a sent one. We was perfectly hunacquainted with what might a transpired, you hunderstand, and ’ave been terrified out of our lives about both of you, which we couldn’t tell, you know, Miss, but what both of you might a been killed, though we didn’t think it very likely, the roads habout ’ere not being partikerly dangerous, you understand. We’ve been pursuing a hinvestigation of the most searching descripchin all

hover the hentre vicinity about, as one might say, without success, till the present moment. Which I'm very much rejiced to 'ave discovered you at length, as the reward of my perseverance, as you may heasily himagine. But where's my lady?"

"She is up-stairs. She has met with an accident."

"A haccident, Miss?" replied the man, turning perfectly pale, and uttering an oath in his consternation. "Then I must run for the brougham—or—what shall I do? I 'ope my lady's been well treated in this place, which it isn't much to look at. Goodness me!"

"Yes, yes. Make haste. I have sent—or the good woman who has helped me, has sent for a doctor."

"A doctor!" cried the man, starting back. "Good gracious, Miss, is it so bad as that? Good 'evings! I must go back as fast as I can. What a day, to be sure."

He ran off, and Val returned to the bedside of the Countess, who was still unconscious. In about ten minutes the physician for whom the old woman had sent arrived, to Val's infinite relief. It was not a stranger, but Dr.

Calthorpe, the medical adviser who always attended Lady Charrington, who had answered Ted's summons. Val met him on the narrow landing at the top of the short flight of stairs, with a pale face and agitated manner.

"Well," said the worthy doctor, "this is a terrible business. How did it happen? However, no matter. Wait a minute. I must ascertain the extent of the injuries. Now, my child, you must keep calm. You are trembling like an aspen. Control yourself, or I shall have you on my list of nervous patients."

Val waited anxiously for his opinion. He looked grave, and there was an ominous compression of the lips, but he declined to give her any idea of the state in which he found Lady Charrington.

"You have sent for assistance from the Grange, I suppose?" he said, gravely, and with not a little evident uneasiness.

"Yes, yes. The carriage will be here in a few minutes."

"This is a serious matter, my child. I will not conceal that from you. Tut, tut, don't shake so. You must not alarm yourself. We must not make bad worse by fidgetting.

There, you are trembling as if you had the ague. Be a little firm. This is only foolishness, Miss Raymond."

"I cannot help it, Dr. Calthorpe. I was a little brave just now, but I am so frightened."

"I make every allowance for you, my child. But you must maintain your composure. Her ladyship has nobody to depend on but you at present."

At this instant the noise of wheels was heard. Val ran to the window. Lady Charrington's carriage was at the door, and on darting down the stairs, the young girl saw Mrs. Hammond and a female servant alighting.

There was no time lost in useless consultation. Dr. Calthorpe directed everything, and then mounted the box with the coachman.

The doctor found Val so calm when Lady Charrington had been placed in bed, that he resolved to tell her the truth.

"I fear she will have a dangerous illness, my dear madam. There will probably be a good deal of fever. It is a most unfortunate affair—most deeply to be lamented. I dare not treat it alone, and must beg that you will telegraph for the physician who attends Lady

Charrington in London. The system has received a great shock. However, do not allow yourself to be frightened."

It was as the doctor predicted. When Lady Charrington recovered from her syncope she was delirious.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LETTER WRITTEN BY "ANGELA."

DR. EDWARDS, the fashionable physician who always attended Lady Charrington in London, speedily arrived in answer to the telegraphic message sent by Val; and everything was done which the highest medical skill could devise to save the life of the patient, at this time really in danger.

Val displayed great courage, steadiness, and tenderness during the progress of her friend's illness, even when hampered by the continual interference of Mrs. Hammond, who considered herself the properly-qualified caretaker of the house and everything that it contained. Mrs. Hammond was an excellent woman in her way; but albeit a bustling, active person, she was altogether astray when called on to minister to the wants of an invalid.

She regarded herself, however, as a paragon, suited in every respect to act in any and every capacity; and had she not looked on Miss Raymond, in her own mind, as not unlikely to be at the head of the house of Charrington at some future period, Val would have found her exceedingly troublesome.

Several persons, neighbours and friends, called and left their cards during the Countess's illness. There was one card which Val frequently noticed among the contents of the basket. It bore the name of Captain Verner, Fifth Dragoon Guards.

Captain Verner, Val thought, was doubtless the handsome stranger of whom she had twice caught a glimpse.

"Not that I care to know," said the little hypocrite to herself, as she examined the card of this particular visitor for the fifth or sixth time. "I have no right to think about it at all."

The second remark, being as true as the first was inaccurate; for she did want to know, while she had no right to inquire.

After a severe struggle with the danger which threatened her, Lady Charrington began to rally; then her health grew more steadily

established every day. She was at length able to sit up in bed, and to talk with some degree of freedom. Dr. Edwards, prior to his departure, so fully impressed on her mind the debt of gratitude she owed to Val for her unremitting attention, that she could not but express her obligation in as gracious a manner as she could command, by additional kindness towards her, and by infusing unwonted cordiality into her demeanour.

Lady Charrington was very much vexed when she found that, where her forehead had struck against the wheel of the waggon, a scar remained. Fortunately, it would be easily covered by her hair, so that it was not so great a misfortune as it might have been. Having satisfied herself as to the extent of the injury, she eagerly demanded to see the cards which had been left during her illness. Val brought the basket.

“They are all here?” she asked, taking it.

Val replied that they were.

She turned them over, and scanned them with the same eagerness as she had displayed when asking for them. Val could not help remarking that she picked out the five or six cards which bore the name of Captain Verner,

and having counted them, threw them back among the others, shook the basket slightly, to mix the contents again, and returned it to Val without speaking.

In her new fit of good nature, and perhaps from having nobody else to talk to, Lady Charrington began not unfrequently to touch on a subject which she had generally ignored hitherto—her own past life. She told Val many amusing anecdotes of persons she had known, celebrities she had met with, places she had visited. One day she was speaking of Lord Charrington, her husband.

“He was a fine-looking man,” she observed, “a noble, distinguished English gentleman. I must show you his portrait. It is a beautiful miniature, by Ross. Open that cabinet.”

Val did so.

“You see the third drawer—the right side—no, the small one, at the side. Press the little star just over the lock—it does not unlock, it is a secret drawer.”

Val was not able for some minutes to find the spring, but at last her finger touched it, when the front of the drawer fell down, and discovered a narrow shelf.

“There is a miniature of Lord Charrington

there ; it is in a little red morocco case. It is there—is it not ? What is the matter ? You seem spell-bound. What are you looking at ?” demanded Lady Charrington, somewhat peevishly. “ One would imagine it was a Medusa’s head instead of my lord’s.”

The young girl was gazing at an open letter, lying beside the case for which she had been searching. She was unable to remove her eyes, yet she saw nothing but the signature, and that was simply “ Angela.” She eagerly scanned the writing, endeavouring to form some idea if it resembled that in the book which she had found at Mrs. Heath’s. So far from being like it, it was the reverse in every respect—being bold, free, and hardly like a woman’s writing. This puzzled Val, who was trying to reconcile things which, having no connection, could not be reconciled. Perhaps the writing in the book was inscribed, not by Lucy Raymond, but by some donor—by some female friend.

“ What is it ?” repeated Lady Charrington.

“ It is a letter,” honestly answered Val.

“ A letter ? Give it to me.” Val obeyed.

“ Ah. Well, why were you so spell-bound by the sight of this letter ?” she demanded, fixing her eyes on Val’s face.

A dead silence ensued.

“Speak. Do you know this writing? Speak! You irritate me to the last degree by this extraordinary, this incomprehensible behaviour,” exclaimed the invalid, with more of acidity in her tone than had ever been perceptible in it before.

“The writing is that of the late Lord Charrington’s sister?” stammered Val.

“How do you know that?”

“I do know—and O, madam—O, you will be angry——”

“Well?”

“I believe that——”

“That what—go on.”

“Will you tell me—tell me—*who* was Lucy Raymond?”

“Lucy Raymond! Are you crazy? I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Was not the writer of this letter—O, pardon me—was my mother ever living in this neighbourhood?”

“My dear,” said Lady Charrington, “you do wrong in agitating yourself, and doubly wrong in agitating me. You forget my weak state.”

“I am wrong—I know—I did not mean—

I will leave you, and return in a little while," said Val, who was trembling so violently that she could hardly stand.

"Stay a moment," said Lady Charrington, whose curiosity had obtained the mastery of her prudence, and who saw by Val's manner that some real mystery was about to be revealed. "I will answer your question, though I fear you are becoming crazy. Your mother did stay for more than a month in this neighbourhood. Sit down. Why did you want to know?"

Val clasped her hands.

"Who sent her here, and why?"

"Lord Charrington sent her down here while her husband, your father, was ill, as she was unable to support herself and her children," replied the Countess.

"And is this her writing?" asked Val, suddenly drawing from her pocket the book which she had found, and shewing the inscription.

"I don't know. I never saw her writing, and I never knew her name. I never saw her."

Val paused, greatly perplexed.

"And now, as I have patiently answered

all your questions, Miss Raymond, answer mine. Why were you so startled by the sight of this letter? Do you know what this letter is about?"

"No, madam."

"Lord Charrington's sister married against his will—married a person very inferior to her in every respect. She incurred my lord's anger, and he refused to pardon her, for he was proud, justly proud, of his noble birth. I never saw her, but she wrote this letter to me—it is dated July 1, 1839, and was posted from a small French town, whither she and her husband had gone—she wrote to me, asking me to intercede for her with her brother, my husband. Now, Valentine, I have told you what I have never told any one else, for we have never alluded to this member of our family."

"Is she still living?"

"I don't know," said Lady Charrington, who was resolved to be patient. "Will you tell me now, in return, what caused your emotion on seeing this letter?"

She spoke quietly, even kindly, and Val was encouraged.

"Will you be angry if I tell you my

thoughts?" the young girl asked timidly, and bending a pleading look upon her mistress.

"Certainly not; why should I be angry?"

"Well, I believe—I know you never thought of such a thing, but—but—I——"

"Proceed."

"The writing in this letter and the writing in this book are different, yet I believe—why, I do not know, but I have a strong conviction that—that the writer of this letter was my mother."

She grew white as death, and drew back as if expecting some one to strike her.

"Your mother? This letter was written by the late Earl of Charrington's sister," said my lady, with a puzzled air, not in the least comprehending what Val meant.

"I know, I know. I think that—she was my mother."

Lady Charrington stared at her.

"Your mother?" she slowly said, her eyes dilating.

"*Your* mother!" she repeated, after a moment's pause, as if trying to realise the idea.

"*YOUR* mother!" she at last said, breaking into a loud peal of derisive laughter, which

continued for several minutes, as she fell back on her pillows. "Absurd! Ridiculous! Outrageous! Girl, if I did not think you were crazy I should be astounded at your audacity. How dare you attempt for an instant to connect yourself with my family? Leave the room. Stay. Who put such an idea into your head? Who has dared to suggest such a—such—such a thing?"

Val, who had covered her face with her hands, raised her head, but did not reply for a minute. Then she resolved to tell Lady Charrington the truth. She saw that Lady Charrington was unequivocally surprised. Accordingly she repeated to her what had been said by the two servants.

"This is all your evidence. You have grossly deceived yourself, Valentine. Do not look so frightened. I am not angry with you. The mistake was a natural one. But you should never trust in the least degree to what you hear from servants, either accidentally or otherwise. Close my cabinet, lock the door, and put the key on the toilette-table. No, place it on this table, by my side."

Val obeyed.

"I am sorry, for your own sake, that you have

fallen into so absurd an error," continued Lady Charrington. "I will endeavour to obtain some convincing proof of your mistake, then you will be satisfied. I am not angry with you, poor child."

Val bent, in silence, and kissed the thin white hand extended to her. She then made her escape, and ran upstairs to her own room, when, shutting and bolting the door, she flung herself on her knees, burying her face in the coverlet of her bed. Her sobs broke forth with such violence that she was at length obliged to take the coverlet between her teeth, lest she should alarm the house.

At length her tears and sobs subsided; she rose, washed her face in cold water, and prepared to descend.

Lady Charrington, on her side, being left alone, began to consider the possibility of Val's conjecture being true. The first surprise over, she could review the subject calmly, and in a business-like manner. One moment she rejected the theory with utter contempt and indignation, the next admitted that it *might* be tenable. The notion of the daughter of a street musician daring to pretend that she belonged to the family was so audacious—so monstrous,

that she was inclined to scout it at once; and she argued, too, that if the wife of that person—that Raymond—had been the sister of Lord Charrington, she would have declared the fact and demanded help as a right rather than as a favour; and again, the writing purporting to be her signature was so entirely different from that of Angela, that no further evidence seemed necessary to disprove the story. Again, the man whom Angela had married was a gentleman both by nature and education, though far beneath her in actual rank, and never could have sunk so low; again, Angela would never have consented to return to the place where she had spent her early life, under circumstances so unlike those which then surrounded her. At the same time, Lord Charrington had entirely lost sight of his sister for some years before the unfortunate occurrence which had introduced Raymond to his notice; the woman—granting her to be his sister—might have had some powerful reason for not coming forward; perhaps she was afraid of his displeasure, his absolute rage, at finding her in such a situation; perhaps she was held silent by deep shame. The writing in the book might have been that of some friend who had given it;

as for the difference in the name, she might have changed her Christian name when she changed her surname. She reflected on the matter until almost bewildered.

“After all,” she thought, “this singular conjecture may have a foundation in truth, and, if so, I will not see the poor child defrauded of her rights. She could not interfere with me in any way, and I should not be sorry to spite Lord Charrington. I will set the detectives on the track. They will be able, I think, to trace Angela, and ascertain if she really was Mrs. Raymond. I can give them a clue—a point to start from, for in 1839 she was living at Trieste, with her husband. It seems impossible, and yet, such singular things happen.”

When Val returned, Lady Charrington told her very kindly, of her intention. Val had not anticipated anything but anger—perhaps expulsion for ever from the house of her benefactor, and her gratitude was proportionate. Indeed, Lady Charrington could only check the manifestation of the young girl’s emotion by what was almost a rebuke.

“My dear child, I must be left quiet. Let us hope, I may now say for your sake as well

as for my own, that I may not suffer from the excitement of this morning."

Procrastination was not one of Lady Charrington's faults. Indeed, she generally ran into the opposite error of precipitation. She wrote to the Home Secretary, and thus the first step was taken.

The excitement consequent on pursuing this investigation, so far from injuring the invalid, seemed to give her new spirits, and to hasten instead of retarding her recovery. Within a week after the discovery of Val's suspicions, she was able to sit up, though she was compelled to remain in her own room.

After a short correspondence, a detective officer was sent from Scotland-yard to confer with Lady Charrington on the subject of the search on which she desired to enter, and the investigation was fairly begun, the Countess giving *carte blanche* with regard to expenses.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTAIN VERNER.

CAPTAIN VERNER was a very handsome fellow.

Certainly, when that was said, unless it were added that he was exceedingly good-natured and good-tempered, everything was said.

He was now about nine-and-twenty or thirty, tall, and remarkably well made. His features were well cut, open and candid in character; his eyes were full, and dark brown in colour. He was not a personage to be sketched in a few vigorous touches, for he did not differ in any essential particular from the dozens of other handsome, agreeable fellows to be met with any fine afternoon in the region of the club-houses, or in Rotten-row. He was not clever, neither was he stupid; he

never said anything surprisingly brilliant, yet he was a pleasant person to talk to, albeit somewhat grave in manner—pleasant with men, especially pleasant with women. The ladies looked on him with peculiar favour, though he distinguished no one in particular by his preference, and despite the fact that he had no fortune of his own, and no income beyond his pay as a captain of dragoons. But certain prudent mammas ascertained that he had splendid expectations from his uncle, Colonel Gordon, a bachelor between fifty and sixty, who was not at all likely to marry, and who had the reputation of being as rich as Cræsus, or Monte Christo, and who had lately bought a magnificent estate in the midland counties, which was in itself an enviable fortune.

In consideration of his “expectations,” Captain Verner was regarded with great favour by more than one match-making dowager, far-seeing mamma, or cautious chaperone.

In consideration of his handsome face and winning manners, he was smiled on by every young lady of his somewhat extensive acquaintance.

He had never testified the slightest inten-

tention of marrying; but many attributed their failure in trying to ensnare him to the supposition that he dared not marry whilst his expectations were so comparatively uncertain; for should his uncle take some whim into his head, and take unto himself a wife, and have a son and heir, there would be a terrible change in the Captain's future.

Captain Verner was on temporary leave of absence from his regiment at the time Val first saw him, and without having any idea of offering more than ordinary polite attention, had called upon Lady Charrington.

The Countess had known him about two years. That lady had never been in love in her life before, singular as it may appear; and she chose to play a very foolish part, now that she might be supposed to have grown old enough to know better. She was as much in love with Aubrey Verner as she could be with anybody. To know if he returned her liking in any degree, she would almost have given everything in her possession; but she never could satisfy herself. She scarcely disguised her preference, and adopted all the wily stratagems which rich and beautiful widows are supposed to have at their disposal, to make

him respond to her advances, but hitherto without marked success; yet, she fancied, not entirely without success, for she flattered herself that he had followed her when he found that she was in the neighbourhood. In the conclusions she drew from his unexpected appearance, however, she was mistaken. He had come partly through idleness, partly for a change, partly from the simple reason that he had been asked to stay for a few weeks at the house of an old friend who had married and retired from the army.

Captain Verner had not the most distant conception that Lady Charrington honoured him with any preference. Had he suspected the existence of such preference, he would have carefully avoided her society. The Captain had a peculiar idiosyncrasy, which led him to bestow his utmost contempt and abhorrence on fortune-hunters. And rather than reduce himself to the level of one of those despicable beings, who seek after a woman only for her money, he would have let himself be pricked to death with the point of his own sword.

Bitterly, though secretly, did Lady Charrington bewail the untoward interruption

occasioned by her illness to what seemed a pleasant train of circumstances. When she was at last permitted to leave her room, and to venture downstairs, she made a most elaborate toilette; for she perceived with dismay that the fever had made woeful ravages, and she had, especially, lost the greater part of her beautiful golden hair, which had been cut. Fortunately, her maid was a "treasure," and could perform wonders to make her mistress look as well as possible. When dressed, ready to descend to the drawing-room, the first day she quitted her chamber, she was, if pale and worn, at least interesting in her appearance. Jessop had surpassed herself. She had collected the long tresses which had been shorn from her lady's head, and formed plaits, with which she concealed the loss at the back, while in front and at the sides she arranged the remaining locks in light feathery ringlets. A little pearl-powder, a loose snow-white wrapper, a few knots of delicate ribbon, and a slightly darkened room, completed the justifiable means adopted "to prevent my lady from looking like a scare-crow," as Jessop mentally observed. As the convalescent glanced in the chimney-glass, the light from a spark-

ling fire illuminating her face, and then contemplated her image in the surrounding mirrors, she felt pleased to observe that she looked exceedingly interesting, and decidedly charming, and, above all, young.

She gave orders, that, if any visitors called they should be admitted; then she ensconced herself in a huge easy chair, and declared that she felt exceedingly comfortable.

“Play something for me, Valentine,” she said. “We have nothing to do, and it will be a pleasure to me to hear you sing some of those new Italian pieces.”

Val cheerfully prepared to comply with this request, and began searching among the loose music on the piano, in the back drawing-room, for something to sing. She finally selected a beautiful air from a new opera, and, after a brilliant prelude, she commenced singing without further delay.

She was in unusually good spirits, and anxious to amuse Lady Charrington; she therefore sang her best. Her rich, cultivated voice filled the rooms with a flood of melody, soft and deliciously sweet.

“Really, my dear child, you have a beautiful voice. Why, you would make a fortune if

you came out as a vocalist," remarked Lady Charrington, at the close of the first part of the air. "What a sensation your voice would have made if——"

She was about to add, "if I could have produced you in society," but she checked herself. At the moment, a servant threw open the door, and announced

"Captain Verner."

A thrill of mingled vexation and delight ran through the heart of Lady Charrington. She was delighted because this visit, almost entirely unexpected, was inexpressibly pleasant: vexed, because she wished it had been possible to prevent the Captain's encountering Val. She was jealous of everybody; but, in London, among lovely women, with whom Val could not for a moment be compared, she felt comparatively safe, while, as a practised woman of the world, she knew that here, far away in the country, even an older and less attractive rival than Val Raymond was to be feared.

Captain Verner followed the servant immediately, with the confidence of an established favourite. Val, who had heard him announced, did not move from her seat at the piano, but waited, concealed from view by the crimson

velvet curtains which separated the two rooms. Lady Charrington rose with an undisguised eagerness, and advanced to meet him, with out-stretched hand. Captain Verner must have been either very blind, or very free from self-conceit, not to have perceived her evident delight. They exchanged the ordinary compliments, and then Lady Charrington requested him to be seated.

“You must have recovered your strength very rapidly,” observed Captain Verner, smilingly, after a few moments of desultory conversation. “I heard you sing as I came upstairs, and your voice sounded remarkably strong and clear.”

Lady Charrington paused for a moment. Then she said, in a constrained tone,

“It was not my voice which you heard. It was a young lady—my *dame de compagnie*, who was singing.”

The captain was surprised for an instant, then suddenly recollected the young girl whom he had seen for a moment on the stairs a short time previously. A momentary silence ensued; then Lady Charrington called, in an embarrassed accent,

“Miss Raymond—come here.”

Val rose, and advanced. She was slightly flushed, for she felt annoyed; her eyes were sparkling, and she came forward with such haughty grace, that she looked perfectly aristocratic and beautiful.

Lady Charrington, without rising, introduced Captain Verner and Miss Raymond, without her usual cordial smile, and reversing the usual etiquette. Each bowed, and then Val retired to one of the windows, and sat down without speaking. Captain Verner drew his chair so that he could easily face both ladies.

After a very short conversation, my lady leaned back, with an air of the utmost languor.

"You must pardon me, Captain Verner, if I claim the privileges of an invalid," she said, with a winning smile. "I am so soon fatigued. I have not yet recovered my strength."

The Captain took this hint, and rose to go.

"It was very good of you to come," she said, turning her beautiful eyes on his face. "And it was very kind of you to call so frequently during my illness."

Captain Verner kissed her hand with an air of gallantry. He then walked across the room to where Val was sitting, and, with a word of farewell, offered his hand. He re-

tained for a moment the hand which she gave, gazing at her steadily, though not rudely, at the same time. He then bowed, and quitted the apartment.

When he was gone, Lady Charrington took up a book which was lying on a little table near her. For about half-an-hour she did not speak, remaining perfectly quiet, her eyes fixed, not on the open page before her, but on the blazing fire. Val, seeing her disinclined to talk, silently drew over her embroidery frame, and began working.

After this Val saw no more of Captain Verner. She knew perfectly well that he called not unfrequently, but by some accident she never encountered him. She was not conscious that any particular means were used to prevent her seeing him, yet she felt that without a certain degree of manœuvring she could not always be absent when he chanced to come.

Lady Charrington never made the most distant allusion to him, or gave Val the slightest encouragement to speak of him.

At the end of a few weeks, his leave of absence having expired, Captain Verner returned to his regimental duties.

A few days subsequent to his departure, Lady Charrington announced her intention of going to Paris, and thence to Florence, where she purposed spending some months. This intention she speedily carried into effect, and quitted the Grange. She did not take Val with her, but promised to write to her from time to time, and to let her know what progress was being made in the search for the lost Lady Angela.

Val therefore remained alone at the Grange during the winter months. This period she always remembered as the most trying of her life. With nothing to do—with no one to talk to, for the servants were not suitable companions—with the most corroding thoughts preying on her mind—she perpetually ranged through the large deserted rooms, or buried herself in the library, or wandered listlessly about the neighbourhood, when the weather would permit. She longed for a change—for any change, no matter what. She pined and moped, wishing, yearning for she hardly knew what—for some one to love her; for something to do; to reach the busy world of which she sometimes dreamt.

Lady Charrington never wrote to her. Val

therefore did not know what was being done, or what discoveries, if any, had been made.

The days wore on painfully, drearily. Often would she inveigh against the cruelty of Fate, which condemned her to an existence thus useless, thus monotonous. Often would she pace to and fro in her own chamber, or look aimlessly out at her window, and cry bitterly from sheer weariness. The hardest work, the most laborious occupation, would have been better than this. Philosophers say that solitude is beneficial, and much to be cultivated; but I say, with confidence, that nothing is more injurious to a young and ardent girl than this same solitude—far more dangerous than any round of gaiety. It may be very well for sages of fifty, tired of the world and its frivolities: it is wicked to condemn young and sensitive minds to a discipline which is more likely to kill than to cure.

Mrs. Hammond, who pitied Miss Raymond's situation, endeavoured to alleviate it by paying her all the attention in her power. Unfortunately, though a talkative woman, and very fond of retailing gossip, she was an intolerably vulgar person, and worried poor Val by continually telling her lengthy anecd-

dotes of people whom she had never seen or heard of, and hints on housekeeping, and wrinkles concerning the care of infants and juveniles, until Val would be ready to beg for mercy.

The winter passed.

It was a morning early in February. The preceding week had been frosty, and the ground had been covered with snow; but a sudden thaw had come, and Nature seemed awakened in an instant from an iron-bound sleep, like the Princess in the Wood. The birds were rejoicing audibly, and the sound of vigorous labour and cheerful song, previously shut in by fast-closed doors, now floated on the soft air of the genial morning.

Val, who, like most sensitive natures, was peculiarly liable to be influenced by the weather, felt her spirits rise as the sun flooded her room with a perfect bath of golden haze. Immediately after breakfast she set off for a walk.

She walked very fast, and was soon quite flushed. With her dress looped up, and her straw hat shading her fair young face, she looked exceedingly pretty. She had walked about a mile, when, turning an angle of the road, she suddenly encountered—

“ Captain Verner ! ”

Her little cry of surprise was echoed by the Captain, who advanced to meet her with an eagerness for which he did not pause to account.

“ How do you do, Miss Raymond ? ” was the Captain’s first observation, as he extended his hand with a most affectionate air. Then he stopped, hardly knowing what to say next. Yet he had never been at a loss in the most brilliant society. Val blushed with pleasure, then blushed more deeply because she had betrayed that very pleasure, and finally gave her hand with honest frankness.

After a few moments the slight embarrassment wore off, and they were walking along together, talking as freely as if they had known each other for years.

As the Captain had not come out with any intention of going anywhere in particular, it did not make much difference to him which way he went. So he accompanied Miss Raymond nearly back to the Grange.

More can be learned of a person’s peculiar turn of mind, likings, dislikings, and idiosyncrasies generally, in a walk like this, than can be discovered in twenty interviews under ordinary circumstances.

The Captain had seen a great deal of the world, especially under its more sunny aspects. He had read a good deal, had, in his own indolent way, observed a good deal. The Captain was, certainly, a most agreeable companion. In fact, if a young lady was not inveterately given to hero-worship, and was not irretrievably attached to somebody else, the Captain was just the person to fall in love with.

Val had not had much experience of life, but she attended with eager interest to the hasty glimpse thus presented to her. She was quick, and had a quaint wit, which, when her shyness evaporated, was exceedingly pleasant.

The Captain, having resisted so many fascinations in so many different quarters already, thought himself perfectly safe, and was beguiled into what some people would have denominated a harmless flirtation.

Hitherto lonely, yearning for somebody to talk to, somebody to think about, Val was now too happy to take any future considerations into account.

Captain Verner informed her, casually, that he was staying for three weeks at the house of a friend in the neighbourhood.

After this, Val went for a stroll every morn-

ing, when the weather was tolerable; and sometimes, even when Mrs. Hammond positively declared it was going either to rain or to snow, or both.

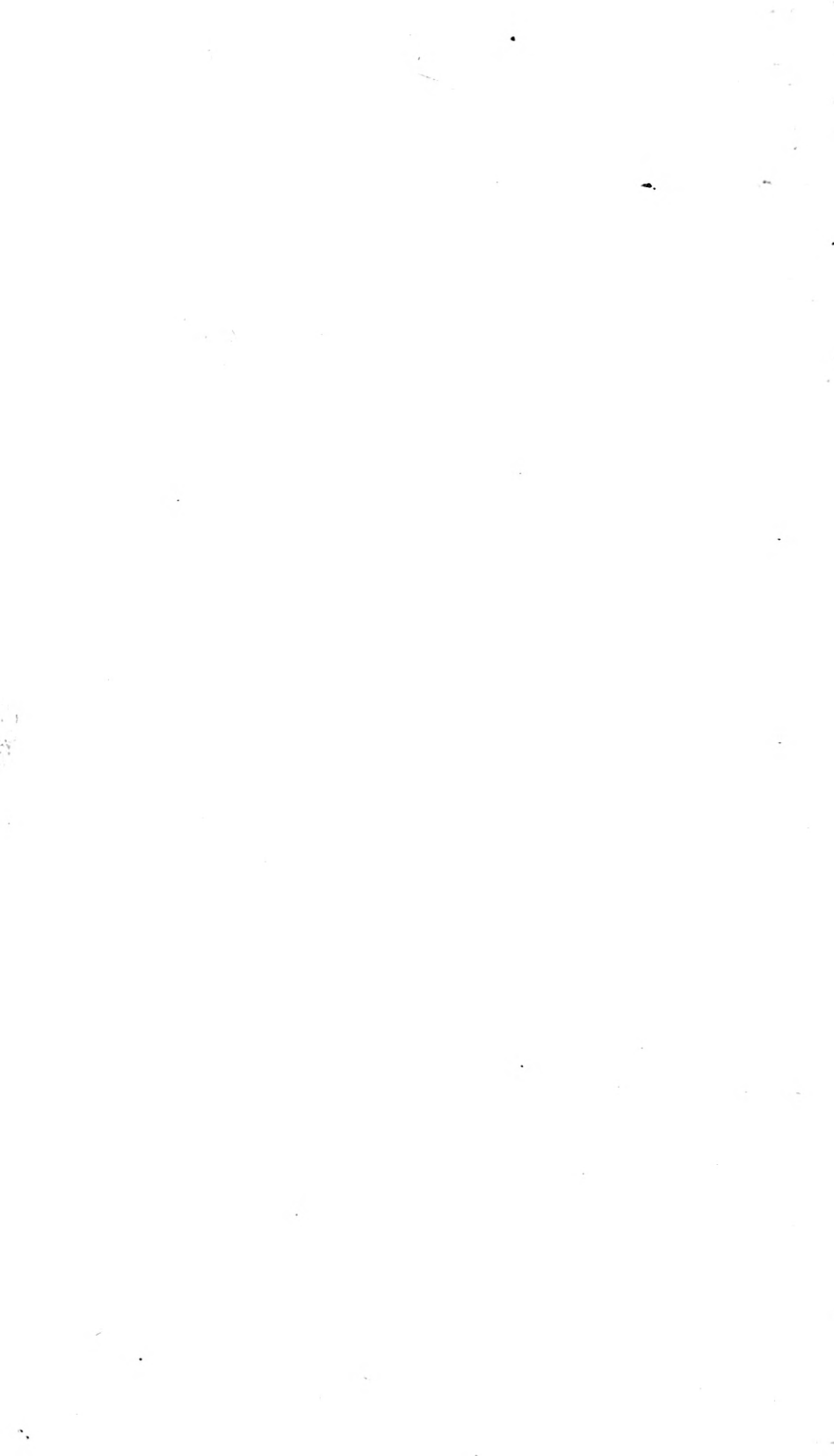
After this, Captain Verner went for a stroll every morning, and as, curiously enough, he always took the same road, he almost invariably encountered Miss Raymond.

The three weeks elapsed, yet Captain Verner still lingered in the country.

The inference is plain.

Could Lady Charrington have foreseen that Captain Verner would have run down to Sussex during her absence, the probability is that she would not have visited France and Italy alone.

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